

A Novel By
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** TUMBLING ANGELS **
PROLOGUE

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England, June 10, 1110

(A small secluded village somewhere in the south of England)

The birds sang merrily that warm hazy morning, as if rejoicing in some magnificent event, which only they knew. A robin fluttered down from the tall apple tree and perched on the open windowsill of a small, thatched dwelling. The proud-winged creature, with its bright red breast worn as if a medal, hopped down onto a small oak table next to the bed. It looked about the bedchamber, chirped, ruffled its fine plumage, and fluttered to the bedpost beside Philippe's head.

Poppa smiled at the bird, then gazed lovingly into the face of her sleeping father, Philippe Domfront. He was just a few days away from his seventy-ninth birthday. She knew the date well because her father and his long-departed brother, Alan, had never forgotten each other's anniversaries or those of their children, Emma and Poppa. Philippe opened his eyes to gaze back at his red-breasted friend staring down at him.

'Thora and Alan, they're waiting for you, Philippe.' the robin chirped, fluffing its plumage. Come along. We have a journey to undertake." The old man whispered, smiling at the feathered messenger sitting impatiently beside him,

'Just a little longer, old fellow. I'll come with you in a little while. I wish to remember my friends.'

Poppa gestured around the room, her pride shining like a beacon into her father's eyes.

'We're all here, Father. Cedric is here too, as are your beautiful grandchildren, Cynwise and Hereward. They've come to say goodbye to the sweetest, bravest, gentlest man that ever lived.' she said softly as her eyes filled with tears.

Philippe noticed Cedric step forward to gently grasp his hand. Philippe gazed deeply into Cedric's azure blue eyes and smiled. 'You're now a full-grown man, the son of a great warrior king, and the good father of my grandchildren. I knew you would never let your father down, or my daughter.' smiling as he squeezed Cedric's hands with obvious affection.

'Your hold is still vice-like, sir.' Cedric said, smiling. 'When you visit with my father, would you tell the king that he is always with us?' Cedric's eyes filled with the glistening wetness reserved only for such great men.

Poppa's hand reached out across the bed to place it upon that of her husband as her children slowly surrounded their grandfather. Emma moved beside Poppa. In her arms, she held a baby girl. The child was not more than a week old. Emma leaned over her Uncle Philippe to show him his first great-niece. The old man's hand rose to touch the sweet softness of the sleeping child's cheek. Smiling proudly, he nodded his patriarchal approval of the family's latest addition.

'The child shall be called Aleine. Alan would appreciate such a beautiful name.' Philippe said, as he looked into the face of the child he would never see run and play.

'Father,' Poppa said softly, 'there are people from the village outside. They have come to visit with you, to say thank you for being their friend. Might they come in?' Philippe nodded his approvingly, his eyes widening as a multitude of people from the village begin gathering around his bed to pay homage to a legend. Each visitor kisses Philippe's hand and says, "Thank you", before moving on to allow the next to show appreciation to the man who was the only living soul that knew the entire truth.

Soon the room quieted again and he glanced once more at the robin still sitting beside him. He winked impudently at the impatient bird then closed his eyes and drifted into a deep sleep remembering once more his brother, Alan, his friends, and the adventures they had shared.

From the clouds his long dead wife, Thora, looked down at her husband.

'My sweet husband, you might begin to tell your story.' she whispered.

'I think this would be a good time, my beloved.' he replied.

His thoughts meandered to his first meeting with Cedric and the intricately written scroll that Cedric had given him to keep safe. Written as a personal history, the manuscript was a first hand account of Cedric's natural father, King Harold. It was an explanation of events given verbatim by Harold to Cedric.

As his rest deepened, the dream took Philippe back to his small farm, seemingly a full lifetime ago.

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TUMBLING ANGELS

CHAPTER ONE

Philippe leaned his tall muscular body resting himself upon the half-gated barn door; his idle gaze wandering up the steep hill heard the church bell echo down the valley sounding the midday hour. He sniffed the air, full of wondrous aromas, and smiled. He noticed the morning bustle of adults up and down the thoroughfare had subsided to the tranquil peace and relative quiet of birdsong. Devoid of people, the sleepy village of Briare was almost ghostlike. It was the time when adults dozed in the shade out of the hot sun and children played. The wind's direction changed, and on the breeze, he caught the barely perceptible, but nonetheless raucous sound of the frivolity as children danced and played, while others swam off the banks of the Loire River to challenge the children of Bédouise on the other side. From the Normandy bank, the Bédouise boys threw sticks at the swimming French youngsters. The children jeered at the playful jibes of the opposing force as they clambered up the steep, muddy banks to participate in mock fighting games with their Norman counterparts across the river border.

He turned his gaze inward, noticing how the sun shone through gaps in the barn walls. The sparkles of dust drifting in the light glistened as they danced about Philippe's brother, Alan the village blacksmith, caressing the blade of a scythe against a grinding wheel. He was proud of Alan's knowledge of wood and metals. Alan's forge always alive with fire and the constant noise of hammer upon anvil sounded throughout the village was, for the time being, silent. Philippe turned to look back to the bright, sun-lit yard and noticed Alan's wife, Maria, with her daughter, Emma, and his own daughter, Poppa, strolling down the hard-rutted dusty street singing.

Maria was tall, slim, full breasted and beautiful. He appreciated her prettiness. She was a girl so natural, every bit a woman, as was her dead twin sister, Thora, his long departed wife. He closed his eyes and thought of her. He recalled her youthful beauty, her love of animals, and her love for him. He missed Thora so much. Eleven years had passed since her death; though it made no difference, for she was always with him in spirit.

His thoughts put aside for a moment; he opened his eyes and looked back toward Maria. She was practical and always smart. He admired Maria's dressmaking skills; an artist in every way. She was dressed from neck to feet in a light brown, tight-fitting linen gown. It was brought in snugly at the waist by several differently coloured twines plaited together to make a flat rope elaborately knotted, the loose ends falling to her knees. The neck of her gown was round and slit down the front, almost to the top of her cleavage.

He liked the way she embroidered the neck and sleeves bands. The outline came to her elbows with a blue diamond pattern set between two parallels. He had asked her to adorn him and his brother similarly and the girl's clothes too. Winter nights sitting round the warm fire gave her plenty of time to fashion her creations.

He glanced at the singing girls and smiled. He blew them a kiss, but they had not noticed him watching them as they and Maria strolled past an old man who looked on and waved.

He had chatted with him the day before. The old man told him he felt inwardly ashamed. He had asked the old man why. The old man explained his manhood could no longer rise to an occasion that was forever lost to his wayward youth.

'If I were forty years younger.' the old man had mumbled thoughtfully with a chuckle. His thoughts, he had said were best kept to himself, and Philippe understood. The old man then dozed off to sleep, perhaps to dream of the girls he'd once known.

He ran his fingers through his short jet-black hair, feeling satisfied with his lot; he smiled. He felt proud of their achievements. He and Alan had a flourishing working farm. Alan was skilful, older by a year; but Philippe was sharp as a knife; and Alan knew it, and together they prospered. He knew the villagers considered his family middle class. They were, he deduced, better off than most village folk.

Smiling, he moved to stand over his brother, motionless for a few moments, and glanced down at Alan. Alan's face, black bearded, took over his features and his moustache flowed from ear to ear, mingling in with unkempt sideburns that Philippe thought looked comical. He patted Alan's shoulders and whispered.

'You will have to do something about the beard, Alan. It's getting out of control.'

Alan put down the scythe and felt his whiskers.

'Leave my face alone, Philippe. Besides, it suits my beautiful moustache and I'm very proud of it.' Alan grinned with a look only Alan could conjure, then reached out to an ale-filled flagon and drank a mouthful.

Philippe glanced up again to look outside and saw Maria getting closer. A stray movement caught Philippe's attention. From behind her he saw what could

only be smoke rising from the direction of the upper village. 'Merde!' he called.

'Look, Alan, there's a fire in the village!' he shouted with growing concern.

He raced to the barn door. Alan followed closely behind him. Philippe saw a sight that worried him even more than any fire. Norman horsemen, in full mail armour, were harrying the entire upper village area. Dismounted soldiers threw lighted torches onto the dry, thatched timber dwellings while more riders destroyed the ripening cornfields. Raucous calls filled the air: whinnying horses: the sound of thundering of hooves, and the terrified screams of women and children in the distance. Shouts and calls of men desperately trying to defend their homes and families echoed along the narrow valley.

Teenage boys tried, frantically, to gather the younger children to the perceived safety of the small timber church. Riders bellowed, as the deafening and terrifying sound of horseflesh on the move came closer, too close, and then veered off toward other crop fields farther away. Philippe noticed more smoke rising, this time from his own fields. His near ripe and ready crops became an inferno. The grey debris-filled cloud of smoke dropped its hot smouldering ash upon the ground. In the dry air bushes and trees fiercely burned, setting off a chain reaction. The wind it created became a ferocious draft of burning hell around them.

Philippe's mind raced. Then, with a grimace he commanded his brother:

'Quickly, Alan! Gather the girls and Maria. Take them to the safety of the woods. Hide under the hollow hoary oak. I will meet you there shortly. If the riders come this way I'll try and head them off!' Alan stood in stark amazement, speechless, at the view just a few hundred paces from them. Philippe yelled once more: 'Go! For the sake of the saints, GO!' Philippe's look of desperation rapidly turned to that of anger; but he rallied, trying urgently to control himself. He needed a plan, and quickly. He pushed his brother towards the cottage where Maria and the girls were heading, unaware of the carnage behind them.

Alan ran as fast as he could, pointing to the village above them, shouting. Maria turned to look up the hill as Alan gathered the two girls into his arms while Maria, now panic stricken, followed him. Suddenly, she veered off her course and into the house. She hastily filled a sack with some provisions of soft cheese, bread and two woollen blankets. He called out to her, cursing her naive stupidity. She scrambled back through the doorway with her sack of provisions little more than an inconvenience, as panic became a concerted effort to escape.

Needing to save their horse, he sped to the stable. He rapidly attached the horse's harness and tied a coiled length of stout rope to it, nervously fumbling with the bridle, readying to lead the horse out. He knew to take this chance was dangerous. If the Normans entered the barn, he would have to fight for his life; but he knew that Alan, Maria, and the children would be safe. Bigger, his destrier horse was the only working animal they had. He was not about to lose her to fire or the Normans.

From the top of the hill where the village church stood prominently, a

terrorized pack of dogs came running past him, one with its tail singed and smoking, yelping. Traumatized children, scared, screaming for their mothers, echoed down the valley. No one was there to calm their terror as they ran to the church. The Normans cut down the fleeing inhabitants viciously as they ran from the troops, falling beside others who had been slaughtered moments before. The soldiers fired the church with all it contained, including those inside who had already taken refuge there.

Glancing up the hill toward the church, he heard the loud, pitiful weeping of helpless women and children, now fatherless. The wailing turned to screams as the flames began to rage around them, trapping all inside the wooden structure.

Soon there was silence, except for the crackling and hissing of burning wood. The air, thick with smoke, darkened the sky, creating a choking brown mass of debris. His nostrils caught the stench of burning flesh; he felt sick. He was aghast, and cursed his inability to help his fellow villagers. His anger grew. He knew well the Normans were no respectors of human life or the church, except when it suited them.

He looked around from the barn door and saw his way was clear of any Norman troops. Quickly, he finished fitting the bridle onto the horse. Tightly gripping the straps, he led the beast out of the barn and took the path made by his family. Searching for an explanation, he seethed, wondering what in God's name Norman troops were doing in French territory. He could not understand why they needed to destroy his village.

He searched for any sign of Norman riders approaching, but saw nothing. He sensed the raiders had completed their work; but that was no guarantee the Normans had gone. He moved through the woods, still untouched by the raging inferno, to reunite with his family. He gave a short, shrill whistle, and listened for Alan's reply. Alan whistled back, and Philippe made a beeline toward him. He looked back and saw the fire had taken hold of the trees nearby.

Running up the tree-filled hill, he stopped to catch his breath for a moment and felt the burning wind on his face, blowing the fire in the direction of their property. Within minutes, the fire reached their homestead, setting it ablaze. There was nothing left; the devastation was total. He felt powerless. He wanted to charge up the hill, into the village, and respond by killing some Normans; but he knew that would be hopeless stupidity. He peered at Alan, sensing that he was near to tears. The brothers said nothing as they each picked up a weeping child. The five, now homeless people had no option but to make their way over the tree lined hill and down along the riverbank to the home of Maria's parents who lived in Courson-les-Carrières, two days walk from Brier.

In a sandstone cliff-face on the other side of the river, Philippe spied what he thought was the entrance to a cave, partly hidden by scrub and trees. He drew Alan's attention to it and pointed towards the cave.

'Aha! Some shelter for us, but we need to cross the river somewhere near here to take a look.' He motioned Maria and the girls to sit on the trunk of a fallen tree while he and Alan investigated. Philippe had trained for river crossing duties with the king's forces. Now it was time to use his skill.

The river was about sixty feet wide, slow flowing, but deep. He wondered how they could cross safely. He glanced over to Bigger and pondered whether the horse could swim across with him astride her. He motioned to Alan to come over.

'We have a rope on the horse, but I doubt whether there is enough to stretch across the river. Besides, the children need warmth and shelter from the wolves and boars, as do we. We have to somehow make an attempt to traverse the water.' Philippe thought that he would risk crossing the river on Bigger's back, but to his knowledge the beast had never swam before. He was grateful that the summer brought less water with it; the river was not so wide and deep. The moment of decision was upon him when he spotted what he could only describe as a benevolent miracle. From up-stream came a boat. It was empty, bumping the banks from side-to-side, as it made its lazy way down the river.

Without a word, Philippe unpacked the rope from the horse and began to make a makeshift grappling hook utilizing two small branches he broke from a tree. From the bank, he began to swing the ungainly implements around his head. At the right moment, he released the rope. With a great clatter of wood on wood, the boat was hooked. Slowly, he drew in the rope. He noticed Alan standing idle and became irritated with him.

'Don't just stand there, Alan! Get hold of the boat!' he bellowed. He looked on as Alan quickly took off his boots, and then waded into the slime.

Grimacing, Alan stretched out his arms, just able to gain a grip on the bow. With great effort, he barely managed to pull the vessel into the reeds. The mud sucked him down to the depth of his knees. His nostrils wrinkled as he took in the putrefying gases released from the sludge that made slurping, sucking noises as he manoeuvred himself across and to the side of the boat.

Philippe sensed Alan was not keen to participate for much longer and understood his brother's plight. He saw Alan managing to pull his legs from the slime and lie flat across the reed-bed, allowing Philippe to heave the vessel closer to a shallow position where the boat could float with one person aboard. The mud was too deep and the water too shallow to attempt a boarding. He pulled the rear of the boat towards him and Alan clambered clumsily into the vessel, his mud-caked clothing weighing him down.

Philippe looked relieved. He felt the discovery of this boat was the only positive thing that had happened all day. He called to Alan, pointed downstream.

'I want you to take the boat a little further to the bend. There should be a sand bank where it will be easier for us to embark,' Alan nodded, almost giddy with relief when he discovered paddles still in the boat. He picked up the long piece of cleanly severed rope and held it high to show Philippe. It was obvious to Philippe the Normans must have just sliced through the mooring rope as they rode past; but it did not matter as he pushed the boat out into mid-stream.

Alan's leggings were caked in heavy mud that gave him the sensation of his legs being twice as heavy as normal, but comfort was not a priority, dismissing his momentary discomfort as occupational inconvenience.

Within a short time, Alan reached the bend where a sandbank, nature's dock, where they could get down to the river without hindrance or sinking into mud. Philippe was soon by his side with the horse, followed closely by Maria and the

children.

'What about the horse?' Alan called out to him, stepping out of the boat looking concerned that they might have to leave the beast behind. 'Are we to leave the horse here, Philippe?' Scratching the back of his head Philippe looked thoughtful.

'I have a plan that should get us all across this river.'

'And that plan is?' Alan asked, looking perplexed.

He sensed Alan had had enough for one day without the added complication of getting a horse across a deep and wide river, chose to sport a confident air.

'When we are all settled in the boat, I'll play out the rope. I hope Bigger will come into the water. If all goes well, she will swim across. Horses know instinctively how to swim.' Trained horses, yes, he thought, but had Bigger ever swam? He had captured his horse from a Norman knight; so she might be okay.

'If the horse refuses, what do we do then?' Alan queried, standing with his hands upon hips.

'We'll just have to leave her.' he replied, while preparing the rope. He looked back over his shoulder at Alan, earnestly. 'Please, Alan, trust me. I know what I'm doing. She'll come.' Philippe noticed the girls looked decidedly unhappy about the venture and were shy to get into the vessel. In all their youth, they had never been in a boat. He kissed them both reassuringly and ushered them to Alan, whose strong arms easily lifted the girls from the bank and placed them into the front of the boat where they sat huddled together, each with one hand gripping the bow, while Maria placed her shawl around them, giving the girls some measure of comfort and reassurance.

'Alan! We have a sign from God! Maria shrieked. 'Look here,' she called, lifting up a sack from the stern. 'There's a small cask of wine, some cheese, and bread too.' She noticed a cassock rolled up and tied with a cord.

Philippe took a closer look at the boat and realized it must belong to their priest, Father Henry. The recognition then struck him. The priest had died in the church with his flock. He grimaced, but kept his thoughts to himself. He somehow knew he had to explain their predicament to the children, but he would never tell the girls what had happened back there. Somehow, he had to smooth and console them for their loss. It would be the fire, a natural occurrence, which had driven them from their home.

For now he could not have cared less whether the previous owner of the boat had been a donkey, as long as it got them across the river. Their immediate needs over-rode his personal feelings. He held Bigger's halter and gently stroked her soft velvet nose.

'My precious lady, sometimes you need to learn to do things that you might never before have experienced. Will you swim across the river for me, eh?' Bigger gave a long snort, spraying all over his hand. Her head nodded as if she understood. 'Good girl.' he said, gently patting her neck while passing one end of the rope to Alan. Philippe attached the rope to the halter and heaved himself on board while Alan paid out the rope.

Paddling hard against the current, they were nearly across the river when the rope went taut. With encouragement from the girls, Bigger began to move into the

water.

'By the bells of heaven, Philippe, she's coming!' Alan cried cheerfully: The large, ungainly looking creature continued deeper into the river. Up to her neck, she waded. Her nostrils lifted high as she swam in the murky brown river.

Poppa called out to Philippe: 'Father, Bigger can swim!' She began waving encouragingly to the mighty destrier.

Philippe smiled for the first time, remembering when he first brought the horse home. The girls loved the gentle giant and named her Bigger because of her enormous size.

Soon the family was out of the boat and onto the opposite bank. The brothers made their way to the cave, cutting down the dense undergrowth with a seax blade to make a pathway. The cave was small and cool, yet large enough to give adequate shelter from the elements. A smooth covering of sand within the cave made sitting comfortable.

Maria moved away some nesting material and debris. She unrolled the woollen blankets she had hastily rescued from the homestead and began to make their shelter snug.

With Bigger now safe on the other bank, Philippe tethered her with enough rope to allow her to graze, then began combing the brush for kindling and firewood. The fire, he thought, would not only keep them warm, but also keep wild beasts from entering the cave. He didn't like the idea of a boar coming upon them, for he well knew that would be highly dangerous.

Alan sat with the girls and told them where they were going and what they were going to do when they finally reached their destination. The day's horrific experiences had left the girls drained and sleepy. He made the girls a makeshift bed then did his best to settle Emma and Poppa down with a story, while Maria prepared some food, such as it was. Soon, the girls were fast asleep.

Alan was tired. They all were, but there were things that needed to be done before they could settle to sleep. He gazed at Maria. She's so muddy. She'll want to clean and wash her clothes when we arrive at Father's cottage, he thought. Alan leaned over to Maria and touched her arm.

'Did Philippe say the boat belonged to Father Henry, my dear?' he asked. Maria nodded, looking away tearfully, and he comforted her.

'We've lost so many friends, our home, everything. By the love of Mother Mary, they all died. I heard their screams as those men fired the church,' she whispered, trying not to wake the girls. Philippe entered the cave, and she turned to look at him, not understanding why he looked so calm.

'You've seen this before, haven't you, Philippe? Have you ever been told to do this by the king?' she seethed, grimacing uncharacteristically, trying to keep her voice as quiet as possible. She noticed Philippe's glare, and realized that she had overstepped the mark.

Philippe pivoted and walked back to the cave's entrance. As he did so, he glanced at Alan, speaking softly.

'In the morning, when we have finished with the boat, we'll pull the boat up and hide it with brush. We will need it to re-cross the river in the morning. If we come back this way, it might come in handy.' Alan nodded compliance. Without

a word, he followed his brother out of the cave to the riverside where they hauled the boat onto the bank. They soon had it turned upside-down and camouflaged it with brush. Just as the light began to wane, they completed their task and wearily trudged back up to the cave.

Alan entered the cave and found Maria sleeping and the girls huddled with their arms wrapped around her. Her head lay resting upon her shoulder. He gazed down at her loveliness. He reached out to touch her jet black plaited hair that fell to her waist; her long linen gown hiding her voluptuous breast heaved. She was a picture of youthful beauty he appreciated beyond measure. He kissed her forehead then whispered something in her ear. Philippe looked away, thinking about Thora, and how Poppa looked so much like her.

In silence, the brothers sat and ate a little cheese with a couple of apples from Father Henry's sack. At last, melancholia and sleep overtook them.

TUMBLING ANGELS

CHAPTER TWO

As the sun's light stroked his face Philippe woke. He looked out of the cave and noticed the mist hovered just above the water. He left the cavern and urinated for what seemed forever, shook himself and made his way back inside. He woke the others and offered breakfast of wine, cheese, and bread that were most welcomed.

As they ate, he planned the last part of their journey. He gave instruction on what they should do if anything dangerous should occur along the way. He was concerned they might come across more soldiers and wondered if Norman troops would venture this far south. After all, he mused, they had travelled nearly three miles down stream. Whatever happened, he would use his military training to protect his family.

'Maria, you and the children will ride Bigger. Alan and I will walk behind. If we are waylaid, you must quickly ride off. We will be able to track you from Bigger's hoof prints.' Maria gave an understanding nod as she cleaned the girls' grubby faces.

The family crossed the river and the men hid the boat. Then, while Alan gathered their baggage, Philippe lifted the three females onto the horse and they set off on their journey.

Philippe thought of his last words to Maria before she and the girls left to go up the hill into the village the previous morning. He had told her it was a hard life, yet prosperous if you were willing to push yourself towards an abundant old age. What an odd thing to say- old age, she had replied. She had told him that was such a long way off, fifteen seasons at least. That was yesterday, an age ago; now there is nothing left.

The forest was a dangerous place to be. Robbers and outlaws stalked the woods and it worried Philippe. He could handle himself, but if there were more than

three robbers, he and Alan might be in serious trouble. He put his thoughts to one side and followed the horse up the steep sided bank away from the river to the south. They headed toward the large bustling metropolis where Maria's father lived, on the outskirts of town.

The wind, no more than a gentle breeze, made the air feel cooler and their expedition more comfortable. The day was nothing like the searing heat of the day previous. The late summer's furnace they welcomed to dry off the barley and wheat before harvesting. Philippe felt grateful for this morning's refreshing zephyr. He gazed up to see the girls seemingly happy and comfortable. The Norman harrying had shattered their dreams. The torment and terror of yesterday's outrage put aside, he sensed the young-ones were glad they were going to see their grandfather and smiled as the cherubs began to sing with Maria a pleasant lullaby.

As the men walked, the brothers talked of their prospects.

'It could have been Bishop Amald's fault, Alan. After all, he had taken some land for himself on the Norman side of the river.' Philippe thought the bishop, on that account, had not made a wise move. He wondered too if it might have been some grievous remark the Bishop had made toward the Norman duke, or intransigence on his or Duke William's part that provoked the raid. He knew it took two to make a deal or a fight. In any case, recalling Maria had said it was common knowledge that Amald and William had often argued; but neither brother really had a clue as to the underlying turmoil that caused them to lose their home.

Philippe brushed flies away that were bothering him, spitting one out that had entered his mouth. He cursed then crossed himself. He noticed Alan chuckling at his brother's vehemence.

Then Alan's performance changed to a more serious tone.

'I'm told the regular Norman forces get paid well. Is that true?' Philippe was, as always, thoughtful. He told Alan that everyone called Duke William the bastard. He explained all he had heard and knew: that the duke trains his men to be self-sufficient and reliable. The duke was known to be a good master when all is going well. His mind raced, his reminiscences going back to the days in training at the barracks of King Philippe. He had learned a great deal about tactics, crossbows, and men too. He recalled his promotion to be a king's bodyguard and how he had worked closely with the king. He knew the king didn't like the Normans all that much and went on to explain that Duke William, for all his power, is still a vassal of the king. He was impressed with what he had heard of the duke's management, becoming convinced this might be a way out of their predicament. 'The duke pays his men well, and his troops get a share of any booty, by all accounts. While I'm not sure about their loyalty to him, it keeps them wealthier than the king's forces, that's for sure.'

Alan rubbed his chin thoughtfully and wanted to know more, much more.

'What happens if his men fall short of expectations, Philippe? How does the Norman lord deal with such weakness?' he enquired, seemingly, yet uncharacteristically, interested. Alan rarely asked his brother anything, other than superficial questions, about dress, armour, and what else the king's

blacksmith did, besides making horseshoes.

'They don't. They are tough men. They ignore any feelings regarding the gruesome work they're sometimes required to undertake. The duke's men demonstrated that to good effect yesterday.' Philippe halted, and turned to Alan, sporting a serious look. 'We have to be realistic, Alan. I might see if I can join them and secure a regular income.' he replied matter-of-factly. For a moment, Alan looked startled, but listened intently as they strode on, as his brother explained how their experiences of the previous day were indeed rare; that yesterday's events, even for the Normans, were unusual.

'We need some way to make money to feed our family, Alan. We can't stay with our stepfather long, because Charles farm is too small to support all of us. Surely, you know that.' Philippe watched the play of emotions across Alan's face; knowing that his brother would want desperately to stay with his wife and daughter.

All had changed. He realised it was impossible to start over, at least for a while; he knew Alan would have to follow him. It was the only way. His eyes narrowed as he flashed back to the previous day, and clasped his hands, prayer-like over his face. He said a silent prayer for those that had perished, and forgiveness for being unable to help those who had lost their lives, when an intestinal cramp suddenly and violently gripped him. He bent, crouching.

'Jeez, I need to do a privy.' he said uncomfortably. 'Carry on along, while I sort myself out, will you, Alan' he said, rushing into the bushes.

Alan strolled on while watching Maria, the girls, and Bigger ambling along gracefully. A spring of emotion welled up, but he tamped it down. I am a man, he thought, these things happen to men. We just have to put up with our lot- get on with it and start again. As he strolled, his thoughts turned to their neighbour, Matilda; recently widowed: a woman of extremely good manners and unusual taste in men. Matilda had married a Saxon dwarf by the name of Duffy. It was from Duffy Alan had learned to speak the Saxon tongue. He recalled how Duffy performed feats of prestidigitatation at the king's court; juggling small iron balls while tumbling, until, one day he injured his spine in a fall. The king granted Duffy a pension, but he never recovered enough to work his magic and tumbling tricks in public. Duffy often entertained Maria and the children with stories of the royal palace and its opulence. He would amaze them with his sleight-of-hand, producing eggs from their ears and coins from under their gowns. In return, the girls baked small cakes for him. Now he grieved at not being able to save Matilda.

Philippe jogged the few hundred paces to catch up with Alan, and feeling much better.

Hearing Philippe's footsteps, Alan spun about.

'You're all sorted then?' he asked, looking concerned; wondering if some malady might have struck his brother. Philippe nodded, smiling. It was the first genuine smile he had had on his face since they had begun working with the grinding wheel some twenty-four hours before.

Alan reached out to touch his arm. Philippe noticed Alan's apprehensive

expression, hidden beneath the forced confidence, wondering what his brother had to say about his idea about working for the Normans.

Alan was quiet for a moment, thoughtful. And Philippe knew what was coming.

'Working for the Normans, Philippe. I guess it makes sense, at least for now. If you join with the Normans, I will follow you. The idea is quite appealing.' he said, smiling thoughtfully.

Philippe knew Alan could handle himself, doubted that Maria would be happy about Alan being away; especially if Alan worked with the Normans. He knew Maria hated the Normans; they ruined her father in the same way they ruined them.

Alan interrupted Philippe's train of thought.

'I'm wondering, what are the chances of us- I mean, could we gain employment with the king?'

'Not a chance; at least, not now.' Philippe replied shaking his head. He knew there are places for trained men, but the king's method of payment was far from ideal. Half of a soldier's pay would be in coins, with the rest paid in royal favours, and he never could get used that. They could never save enough to regain anything like he had previously working with the king. 'Our only hope, Alan, is to join the Normans. The duke actually pays twice as much as the king, and in full too. If you're good and quick witted, promotion is guaranteed, especially for educated men with good minds, such as us. What is more, we are literate. That has to be in our favour.'

Alan clapped his hands together, startling Philippe.

'Right, Philippe, that's settled then.' His face now less of a frown than it had been just hours before. 'How Maria, her father, and the children will take the news of our decision isn't guesswork.' he said with a heavy sigh.

They strolled on, and the day progressed without incident. In the distance, heavy clouds fleetingly hid the afternoon sun, promising rain later. As they came over the brow of a hill, Philippe could see clearly the town of Coursonless-Carières in the valley falling gently away before them. It was an impressively large, thriving town with a new, almost completed church. The children spotted the tall tower, and pointed excitedly toward two men perched precariously atop the tall square bell chamber as they worked.

The smell was awful. The dry, dusty road, littered with horse and oxen droppings. They all wrinkled their noses and held their breath. Horseflies, a constant nuisance, caused everyone to swipe at them continuously. It was all any of them could do to stop themselves from retching. The smell of tanning and hides, not yet cured filled the air with a malodorous stench as they as they passed through the busy township was so bad it brought tears to the girl's eyes.

An hour later, the pungency of the town passed and, as they came into view of her parents home, Maria caught a glimpse of her father, Charles, milking a goat.

Noticing movement, Charles looked up and squinted at the approaching figures. He got to his feet, scratched the back of his head, and waited for the visitors to get closer. Finally, recognizing his family, he stood up and waved, calling:

'By the joys of Heaven, its Alan and Philippe, with Maria and the girls!' Maria! Boys! What are you doing here?' He bent low to receive his beloved

granddaughters running toward him. 'How are my sweet little flowers growing?'

The goat's leash fell to the ground and the animal skittered away, quickly disappearing around the rear of the house. As the two girls hugged and squeezed their grandfather, they squealed, kissed, and embraced the old man who adored and loved them so much. He always spoiled them with his hand-crafted dolls and playful conjuring tricks he had learned as a boy.

Philippe placed his hands prayerfully to the tip of his nose. He glanced over at Alan, who stood staring fixedly at the ground. Philippe raised his eyebrows and then turned away, to gaze back at the woods from which they had emerged. He searched for the words, but blurted out:

'We've been made homeless, Father. The Normans destroyed our village. We've lost everything except our horse.' he said, his head bowed.

Charles looked astounded at the news, and cried out in astonishment.

'What?' Charles asked, not sure if he had heard correctly what Philippe had said. 'You'd better come inside. Your mother is visiting with her sister, but she should be back soon.'

Charles shooed his daughter and the girls toward the cottage entrance. Once Maria and the children had disappeared into the house, he turned to Alan and Philippe, his expression grave.

'Now, boys, you'd better tell me what happened.'

The brothers looked at each other, then Philippe stepped forward and took out one gold and six silver coins from his purse. He placed the coins in the old man's hand and closed his fingers over them. Smiling sweetly into the face of his father-in-law, he felt the stinging of tears, but managed to squelch it. He knew that Charles understood. It was a situation Charles, as a young, newly married, man, had experienced before, under similar circumstances.

'We know there is no room here for us all, Father. This will take care of Maria and the children for a while. You may keep Bigger with you to help on the farm. Alan and I are going to look for work.'

Poppa ran outside, interrupting, calling to Philippe and Alan that they must look at the new baby goat. Alan said that he would go with her and see the kid. He ushered Poppa around the side of the house, leading Bigger to the barn as he went, indulging his niece while leaving Philippe and the old man alone.

'Where will you find work, my son?' the old man enquired.

'Alan and I want to work for Duke William. Lately, there have been things happening that have seen him lose many of his forces in skirmishes with the king. He will be looking to recruit trained men. As you know, I am skilled in the craft of war. I've passed many of these skills onto my brother. We can earn more employed by the Normans in a month than we did in a year, tilling the land.' He replied, staring the old man squarely in the eyes. For a few moments, there was silence. He sensed Charles concern for him, until a fly landed upon Charles large, nobly nose. Charles brushed the fly off in irritation as Philippe suppressed a smile.

'The Normans.' he muttered, 'The bloody Normans!' he exclaimed, louder. Philippe's gaze flickered to the hills, embarrassed. Determined, to stand his ground, he was not going to move until he had obtained approval and blessing for

their venture. He started as Charles hand landed heavily upon his shoulder. He glanced towards the cottage and felt the old man twist him around to face away from the doorway as he walked him around the yard, making sure no one could hear what Philippe knew could only be an admonishment. Charles lowered his voice an octave, his tone terse.

'Are you out of your senses, boy? These men come to your village. They burn your home, take your livelihood away from you and you want to join them! Philippe, look me in the eye. Tell me once more what you have planned!'

He felt Charles snappish tone biting into his normally passive sensibilities. He wasn't sure if the old man's annoyance at his decision to join with the Normans wasn't personal. Charles distress became more than evident to him as he continued pressing him in a manner that he felt was less than fair.

Philippe glared into the old man's eyes, his manner challenging, and went on the offensive.

'You wish that we should starve? Is that what you want for your grandchildren, daughter and us, your adopted sons? All the money we had went into building that farm. Now it is all dashed, and I haven't a clue why. We will rebuild the property once more with the money we can earn. To be honest with you, I don't, at this point, care too much who pays me. This farm can scarcely support you and Mother, let alone five extra souls. The land is poor beyond belief; crops don't grow well here.' he said in exasperation. 'We've no other option! The king pays scarcely enough to keep one man, not a family. You must understand our only option has to be with the Normans.' Grimacing, he turned away, wondering what he could say next, when he felt Charles take hold of his arm. Philippe endeavoured to suppress his distress and disbelief at his family's misfortune and of those of his fellow villagers. Flashbacks from the previous day haunted him. He hoped, desperately Charles would understand their decision. Listening respectfully, he stood his ground.

'Damn! Must you work for the bastard? It's not quite what I expected of my boys.' he said forcefully, grating what was left of his teeth, his frustration manifest. He glared at Philippe, then his posture weakened, he lowered his head and sighed. 'If you must find work with the Norman duke, and you can see no other way.' He paused; his expression grew to one of resignation. 'Then, my son, I have no other option, except to give you my blessing.' He cleared his throat, shrugged and nodded. 'Philippe, do what you have to. I understand that sometimes even a good man has to cut bread with the devil.' Taking Philippe's hand in his, he continued, 'My boys are the sort of sons that make a man proud.' He grinned, blinking away the tears. 'I understand your reasons, though I've no love for the Normans. If the duke pays well, you might soon have the means to start again. Maria and the girls are welcome to stay as long as they need. Please, don't forget to come back—you hear.' Charles had lost this battle. His boy had given sound arguments he could not parry. He smiled broadly and embraced his beloved son-in-law; their differences resolved. Sporting a great sadness, Charles gazed at him longingly. 'When will you go?'

'The sooner we leave the better. In the morning would be a good time. We have

a two gold bezants and enough silver coins to pay our way until we get to Caen, maybe longer.' He explained at length. Once there, it was just a matter of getting hired. He thought that obtaining work should be easy enough. He had the skills and Alan would take his lead from him. Just how they would send the money they earned home he was so not sure, and was sure there were couriers they could use. Philippe told him how the girls engineered a small business from making moss towels for the women of the village back home. Perhaps they can be just as industrious here, he wondered.

He glanced over the old man's shoulder noticing movement.

'Ah, here is my brother.' he said, and then smelled the air, noticing that distinctive odour he knew meant rain. He looked to the sky and saw heavy rain clouds approaching and pointed northward. 'I see rain heading this way. You're in need of a shower, Father.'

Alan ambled across the dusty yard toward the two men, unsure of what to expect from his father-in-law.

'Has Philippe told you of our plans, Father?' he asked as Charles stepped forward to embrace him.

'You have my blessings, Alan.' He pushed Alan at arm's length before his finger prodded his chest. 'Not without reservations, mind.' he added, smiling. Alan glanced toward Philippe, who returned his look with a wink; his smile told him all their plans had gained the old man's approval.

Philippe noticed the sharp shadows around them had become dull replicas of their former selves and glanced up again to see the sky quickly darkening. Menacing clouds drifted closer. With a mighty flash, a deafening crash threw everyone to the ground. A blast of expanding air blew a lime tree, roots and all, through the air. The smouldering, splintered tree landed next to the thatched barn, narrowly missing the cottage.

The men jumped up, hurrying into the house to join Maria and the girls. As lightening bolts crashed, rain poured down in torrents around them. The yard became a quagmire as the rivulets raced past, carrying debris in its wake. As quickly as the storm had begun, it finished. The black clouds moved on to terrorize some other village and the sun shone as brightly as before. Steam rose all around, leaving the stench of rotting vegetation that made even the hardest man retch.

Alan crossed the yard and entered the barn to tend to Bigger, establishing her own space in the building's occupancy of goats and an ox. He brushed her down and cared for her needs. Speaking gently to her, his tone soothing, as he told her of their plans and why she had to remain behind. The light dimmed in the open doorway and Alan turned to see Maria standing there, listening. He clenched his teeth and averted his eyes from his wife, lest she see just how badly he wanted to stay with her, his resolve teetering. He continued his methodical brushing while silently cursing the fate that was about to separate them. He felt a soft hand on his arm, stilling his movements. As he glanced down into her face and saw a pained understanding of their reality. He heard the girls chattering excitedly with their grandfather and Philippe as they gathered vegetables for an evening meal, they tended the muddy garden patch on the far

side of the house. He dropped the brush, then, crushing the soft curves of Maria to his body, rocking slowly with her, trying to keep the lump in his throat from becoming an unmanly wail. Maria squirmed a bit in his tight hold, and her leg eased out to catch the edge of the door, shoving it closed.

The next morning was bright, clear, warm and humid. Philippe helped to fill his brother's carry-pack while occasionally looking through the open louvred window in the direction of the hills to the north. He mapped the route out in his mind's eye, the distraction making him oblivious to the flurry of activity.

Alan packed his spare boots, some clean hose, and a pot of goose grease to keep his boots dry and supple. His packing finally complete, he approached Emma, throwing his arms around her to cuddle and kiss his beloved daughter. She ran her fingers through his jet-black hair and fondled his full beard, she giggled and kissed him.

Philippe noticed Poppa sitting on a stool, looking forlorn.

'Poppa, you are my sweet flower. Come into to my arms,' he said. She rose from the stool and ran to him, her arms outstretched, her eyes tearful. He struggled to hide his sadness from her as he held her close. In their hearts, they both knew they would not see each other for a very long time. As he comforted her, he glanced across at Maria. He knew that she was strong and philosophical. He saw her gazing deeply into Alan's eyes and noticed her longing and deep melancholy. She embraced Alan tightly before kissing her man gently on his lips and whispering almost inaudibly into his ear.

Philippe hungered so much for Thora to be with him now, to hold him as Maria did Alan. He couldn't understand why Jesus would want to take her from him. He shrugged off his melancholia; there was work to do.

Maria's head fell against Alan's chest.

'I understand it may be a long time, my husband, before I will see you again. I want you to know that you so are beloved by me more than you can ever imagine. My father chose you both well. When he agreed to our matches, he knew that you were good men from a good family. I am lucky. Many women are not blessed with such good fortune in a man.' She released her hold and turned toward Philippe and embraced him. 'Philippe, I am with you both on this journey into the unknown. I pray that Thora will look down upon you and give you comfort and good heart for what will be ahead of you, my dear beloved brother. Look after my husband and see that he comes to no harm.' She bit her lip as a tear trickled down her cheek. He held her at arm's length. He bowed his head a little and stared deeply into her eyes.

'Have no fear, Maria. I have a vested interest in this family's safety too.' He smiled, drew her closer, and kissed her forehead. 'When I look at you, I see my beloved Thora. She speaks to me sometimes. Did you know that?'

'I'd hoped so. My sister comes to my dreams also,' she replied, smiling. Poppa held on tightly to her father, her hand gripping his tunic fiercely. He picked her up and held her close to him, her head in his neck. She kissed his cheek and muttered loving words into his ear.

'I will try to be back very soon, my cherub. Alan and I will build a new farm

for us. Then we will make a better future for our family. It will be your job to look after your grandmother and grandfather. You will be their helping angel from heaven, my darling, um?' he said, snuggling his stubbly chin into her cheek.

'I will be good, Father. I will wipe the tears away from grandmother, and I will be strong for her. Grandfather will be so happy to have me look after him.'

The door opened revealing Maria's mother, Adela, bearing fresh bread, cheese, some young apples and a flagon of wine. Adela embraced the brothers while tears began to stream down her cheeks.

'What's going on?' she asked, confused.

Philippe started forward, but Charles took Adela by the arm and walked her through the door to the yard, where he explained the situation to her. They stood talking for what seemed an eternity before returning indoors. Adela embraced the brothers in turn; her grip so tight that each wondered if she would crush him.

Philippe gazed at Poppa and wondered what she would be like when he returned. He knew it would be more than a year, perhaps even two, and both girls would be young ladies by then. He felt his resolve faltering and wondered if, perhaps, Alan and he ought to stay and help work the farm, but acquiesced. He knew that to have a future he must make his own life his own way. He understood that whatever came to him, he must endure.

Charles stepped forward, placing into Philippe's hand a tiny wooden case, no more than the size of a walnut. Philippe opened the keepsake and looked inside. Within the box, four snippets of hair curled into plaits. He glanced up at Charles, and saw the old man smiling at him, almost embarrassed.

'It contains a lock from each of the girls, along with those of Maria and Thora.' he said as he rested his arm upon Philippe's shoulder. Philippe's emotions, were in utter disarray and embraced the old man. He once more opened the keepsake and placed a finger inside to touch the remains of his long-dead wife. He excused himself and headed for the doorway, tears streaming down his cheeks. Adela went to follow him, but Charles held her arm, restricting her.

'Leave him to his grief, dear. He needs to be alone with Thora.'

'But-.'

'I said leave him.' Charles placed his finger to her lips. Adela understood and took a step forward, her arm outstretched to grasp Alan.

'You will look after him, won't you?' Her eyes implored him to keep Philippe safe.

'Yes, of course, Mother, I promise.' Alan turned to Maria. They both knew this was the moment. She kissed his lips softly. Emma and Poppa held out their arms, reaching up as Alan bent forward to kiss both girls cheeks.

'Be good for Mama, you hear?' Alan said, turning his gaze towards the roof beams to hide the redness in his eyes.

In unison, the girls replied they would.

Alan composed himself just long enough to say a few last words.

'Make sure your grandfather doesn't get into any trouble.' he said, smiling.

The girls giggled aloud at the prospect of their grandfather in trouble with anyone.

Alan picked up the carry-bags containing their provisions. Outside, he saw Philippe sitting silently on a log; he appeared composed. He looked across at Alan, smiled and got to his feet, strolled over to him and embraced each other.

'Are you ready?' Alan whispered.

'As ready as I will ever be, I guess.' he replied. 'I'm sorry, Alan, it's just that-.'

'It's all right,' he interrupted, 'we understand. We need to get a move on, or it will be tomorrow before we get on the path to Caen.' Alan passed his brother's knapsack to him. They turned to look at their family standing at the doorway. Maria was holding back the girls; knowing they really wanted to restrain their father's departure.

From the doorway, Charles and Adela waved goodbye to the departing duo with tearful eyes. As the boys returned their wave Charles called out to them.

'Be safe, and be true and honest with your dealings with the Normans. We want you back safe and healthy.'

The brothers set off on their long journey to Normandy with a wave and a call from Alan stating that they would soon be back, more for the benefit of Emma and Poppa than anything else.

Their route was free from robbers or Norman soldiers, for which Philippe remarked that he was particularly thankful. In dappled, dancing shadows they followed a tree-lined pathway that shaded them from the hot morning sun. Wild flowers welcomed their passage, seemingly waving to them in the breeze, their bright colours bringing some comfort to their hearts. The late afternoon became early evening, their tired legs made walking arduous. The route seemed endlessly uphill, until they reached the outskirts of a small village they'd espied from a previous hilltop. Philippe advised they ought to rest awhile by the edge of small copses. Under the shade of an ash tree he took from a knapsack some provisions of bread, cheese, boiled ham and they began to eat their fill.

Alan's nostrils twitched.

'Can you smell something? It's that stench of decomposing flesh. I think we should move away to find a spot where there's no rotting badger or fox to contend with.'

'Can you smell something?' Philippe said, noticing a couple of rooks fighting over some carrion or other, when his perception narrowed all his senses to a focal point.

'I asked you that just a moment ago,' Alan replied, 'but you were off in a world of your own!'

'I'm sorry, Alan, I was just- it does not matter.' he replied, thumbing the little box. Thora, he knew, would always be with him.

Not ten paces from where they sat the body of a man lay over the branch of a fallen tree, partly hidden in the dappled shade. Philippe motioned to Alan with a finger to his lips that he should keep perfectly still and quiet. He looked about him for signs of people, anything that might have moved or seen them. On hands and knees, he crept forward to inspect the body. The shaft of a broken

lance, its shank made of ash was poking out of the man's back. The tip had been driven right through the man and out of his chest. He recognized the tip to be of Norman origin. He thought that the man had been dead about three days. He crossed himself and mumbled a prayer for the victim. Nearby, he noticed a clump of wild dill and grasped a handful, crushing it against a stone, rubbing the herb upon his sleeve. He lifted his arm to his nose to help stifle the stench of decomposing flesh.

A few paces farther along the path, he saw another body. It was that of a man with the top of his head sliced almost completely off. With only the skin holding the remains of the head together, it looked a bloody mess. The man's brains were spilled out over the ground. Flies abounded, and two crows flew off as he approached the body. It reminded him of a skirmish he'd been involved in when a Norman raiding party had been caught unawares by the king's troops returning from tour of border duty; the Normans coming off the worse for their exploit. It had been his first experience of warfare and when he won the destrier as his prize. Once more, he made the sign of the cross and said a prayer for the fallen man's soul, then returned to the first body to snap off the spear tip. He made his way back to where Alan lay in the tall grass, out of sight.

'Here,' he said, passing Alan some dill, 'use this to help deal with the stench.' then nudged him and pointed towards the trees beyond. He had spied something. 'I think our luck has just changed, Alan. Look over there, is that a mirage?'

Alan peered in the direction of Philippe's pointing finger, but couldn't detect what was obvious to his brother. 'What is it that you see?'

'Well, if that is not a tumbril with a horse attached, then I'm the king of France! Philippe grinned. 'See the carriage trapped between two trees. I wondered why these men were out here alone with no implements of any kind.'

'Where is it? I still can't see it.' Alan asked, feeling rather stupid. Philippe wondered if his brother was going blind, for him, the site stuck out like lone cloud on a sunny day.

'It's just beyond that coppice, to the left of the fallen tree. Can you see it now? I have a feeling this is the work of Normans in the vicinity. What's more, I think we might have crossed over into Norman territory.'

'Why do you think that?' he asked, still peering into the trees, searching for sight of the tumbril.

Philippe held out the offending lance head for Alan to inspect and explained that the spear tip was Norman, and showed him the mark: each spear tip is numbered with a Roman numeral.

'The duke likes to keep track of his weaponry.' he said knowledgeably. 'The village has probably been harried, but the crops are still intact.'

He understood the Norman way of punishing delinquent villages. They never burned their own territory's crops; they got their own men to harvest them later and bring the yield into Caen. Then they left the village to think about their sins, to make out as best they can until next year. The thought of losing it all again keeps the people in line. At least that's the idea.' Philippe thought

allowed: 'This sort of treatment just breeds resentment. Eventually you will end up with a full-blown rebellion on your hands. Acts such as this has brought the duke so much trouble in the past.' he remarked, sorrowfully.'

Alan moved to peer over Philippe's shoulder, away from the tree blocking his view. At last he saw the horse and tumbril Philippe had spotted.

'My guess, Alan, is that the horse panicked and ran off, leaving the Norman soldier chasing the fleeing men. I suspect it was one man on horseback, and he might have spotted these two on their way out in preparation to harvest a crop. I guess he left the main harrying party to do this little job, or had even been ordered to ride off to get them. I see very little in the way of hoof prints. The use of a lance and then a sword would give this away. You tend to pick up little clues like this as you go.'

'Philippe, do you suppose this is a coincidence?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, we found a boat with oars, food, wine and now this. If I'm not mistaken, either all this is a dream, or God is trying to tell us something.'

'Perhaps,' he shrugged, 'but if he's telling us something, then I doubt it's a dream.' he said with a chuckle. 'We shouldn't take the Lord's generosity lightly, Alan. Our journey will be a little less arduous from now on. Come on, before someone else takes our prize from us.' he said, grinning broadly.

They untangled the horse and tumbril from between the trees and inspected the cart. The cart was undamaged and full of implements, in pristine condition.

Following the beaten path they made their way towards the village. Philippe's suspicions were confirmed when they neared the smouldering remains of what was once a community. Bodies lay here and there, some scorched, others charred beyond all recognition; the vile stench of death lay over the ashes like a fog. He gazed about, but could see no women or children; the decimation was complete. He gave Alan a hard stare. Alan turned away to gaze over the ruined village. Without discussion, and rather than risk any chance of incurring the wrath of potential survivors they might encounter they skirted round the rest of the village. Philippe was cautious. They had had, he thought, enough problems of their own, without taking on the heartbreak of others.

'Those two men back there,' he said as he geed on the horse, 'were the aldermen of the village, Alan. It was their horse we've taken. They've engraved their status here upon the bridal--brothers, perhaps? I guess they were like us; prosperous, but just a little older, that's all.' Alan said nothing. His head bowed, he, too had had enough of killing.

Three days later, the brothers entered the great bustling city of Caen. It was a metropolis unlike any other Alan had ever seen. The skyline was dominated by wooden scaffolding surrounding a great cathedral under construction. Tradesmen were everywhere, their driving bustle a wonder to behold. Even Philippe, who was used to crowds, had seen nothing like the activity they were experiencing.

As they made their way deeper into the city, Philippe stopped an old woman to inquire the whereabouts of the duke's garrison, but the woman bared her breasts

and snarled at him. He deemed her obviously mad and to be of no help at all. He cursed his ill luck, that of all the people in the world to ask directions, he picked out a lunatic. Alan grinned, but thought better not to humorously make some quip.

'There's too much bustle, too many people, all too busy to stop and speak. I'll tell you this--if I manage to attract someone's attention for more than the count of three--.' He caught Alan chuckling, and admonished him. After all, he mused, Alan had not seen a mad person before. He shrugged, shook the reins geeing the horse onward.

'Our priority, Alan, is to sell the horse. We should get a reasonable price for her, which will keep us alive for a few months or at least until we get work.' he said gazing about, looking to attract someone's attention. Alan said nothing. Philippe could see his brother was overawed with everything he saw. Alan had never been to a city before, he had never been anywhere for that matter, he mused.

He pulled the horse up, halting their progress. He leaned in the direction of a merchant who was waiting for them to pass. Irritated from his last encounter, he called out in a no-nonsense voice to the man.

'We need to get to Duke William's garrison. Could you give me directions?' The merchant glanced up at him, then at what they had in the tumbril. Philippe noticed the merchant staring thoughtfully at him, sizing him up; sensing the man considered them to be country-bumpkins and they were not crossing the river to sell their wares.

'The cost will be very high if you're going to take the beast and the tumbril across the river. In any event, the crossing is farther south, which is about an hour's ride with the hack you have. Am I right in thinking you have come looking for work?' the merchant asked, astutely. Philippe had the feeling that he might be on to something to their mutual advantage.

'Something akin to that.' he replied non-committally. 'We're looking for a buyer for this most valuable pair.' he said, grinning. 'Would you know where I could find someone who might possibly be interested? Perhaps you might be interested in making us an offer. As I said, it would have to be for both the animal and tumbril with its contents.' he said, gazing down at the man confidently. He watched as the merchant strolled around the horse, running his hand down the animal's flanks. He checked inside the horse's mouth, then the eyes, and finally the hooves. He stood expressionless as he contemplated a deal.

'Um?-- I'll make you a reasonable offer for both. How about seven hundred silver Bayeux minted coins?' Philippe had never heard of such a vast amount of money before, let alone owned such a fortune. He laughed and shook his head vigorously.

'Eleven hundred or we go elsewhere.' Philippe replied firmly.

The man walked around once more, looking over the horse and tumbril even more closely.

'Nine hundred silver pieces, not one shekel more. I have a living to make, my boy.' he offered.

'Well, it's been nice speaking with you.' he replied, bidding the man good day. He began to ready the reins to move on when the merchant grasped the horse's bridle.

'Wait!' the merchant barked, 'You drive a hard bargain, young man, but I will give you what you ask. There is a matter of the tax, though. That will be fifty, so you will receive one thousand and fifty silver pennies. Is that understood?' Philippe nodded. He nearly fell off the tumbril as he dismounted, more from surprise and shock of this acceptance than anything else.

'That will do nicely.' Philippe replied blandly as they gripped arms to seal their bargain. 'I'll leave them in your good hands, then.' Philippe smiled wryly toward Alan as his brother dismounted. They both walked inside the small merchant's shop to collect the money due them. The merchant's box was locked and very secure. It took a little while to get it unfastened and the chains that held the box to the wall released. Payment was made, with Philippe carefully counting the silver pennies.

Soon, the brothers were on the way south to find and cross the bridge that led to the garrison. Alan looked at his brother with utter admiration.

'I've never seen such money. How did you know how much money to ask?'

'I didn't,' Philippe replied, carrying a smirk. 'I guessed he would offer me the lowest price possible. So I took the lead from him. He probably robbed us, all the same. I'm sure that in Caen we would have to pay four times that price if we had to buy what we've just sold.' he stated, and gave Alan a grin his brother knew well.

Philippe was well pleased to have two years money for each of them in their purse. That was not bad going for a couple of dumb country boys, he mused.

'The garrison can't be too far. I'm feeling quite confident, Alan. With a suitable bribe, I'm sure the recruitment officer will not turn us away. Come on, let's go and find ourselves some employment.'

As they walked towards the bridge crossing at St-Andrés-Orne, Alan felt upon his face the sea breeze for the first time. It was cool, salty, and very wet, not the sort of moisture one feels from rain. This was somehow different. He couldn't quite put his finger on how to describe such dampness.

Philippe halted for a moment and put a finger into his mouth to wet it. He pulled out his finger and held it high above his head. Alan stood watching this action for a moment and wondered if Philippe was losing his mind.

'It's going to be a good day. The wind is coming from the west. Soon you're going to see something that will utterly amaze you. I've seen the sea a few times. It's huge, a body of water you could never imagine in your wildest dreams.'

The hot August sunshine, tempered by a seaward breeze made the journey a pleasant stroll. They walked along the riverbank until they came across a queue of people. They were waiting to traverse the narrow arched stone bridge that linked one part of Normandy to the other. Alan had never seen such a huge bridge. Six arches, wide enough for two tumbrils to cross side-by-side. It was the last stone crossing before the river reached the sea. The river Orne was narrow and shallow enough at this point to cross without a ferry. Alan was very

impressed.

As they got closer to the toll, Philippe pulled out a few coins in readiness to pay the toll man. At that moment there came a clattering of hooves behind them. The people moved away quickly, knowing that there was no mercy from a galloping horse. A lone warrior approached and rode past carrying the duke's colours on a gonfanon attached to the end of his lance. He continued through the toll without paying the man at the gate.

'This is how we will ride through this toll gate soon.' Alan stated, naively.

Philippe, of course, knew otherwise. He'd noticed the look of awe on Alan's face as the man had ridden past them, but said nothing until they had paid the toll and were across the bank on the other side. They walked along a dusty road, following the directions given to them by the merchant a couple of hours before. The heavily rutted track led up a gentle slope for what, to Philippe, seemed an eternity. As they rounded a bend near the top of the tree-lined hill, Alan stopped in his tracks. He dropped his knapsack to the ground and gasped in awe at a sight he would never forget.

'That, my brother, is the sea!' Philippe exclaimed gleefully.

'That's amazing! I know you said the sea was big but you never said it was that big! Do you mind if we just sit here a while, Philippe? I really need to take this all in.'

'I guess so.' he replied, internally chuckling. He sat under the shade of a tree and opened his bag to reveal the little box given to them by Charles. He touched the contents within. As he passed it over to Alan, their eyes met, and smiling in remembrance of the ones they loved so dearly, the brothers crossed themselves. Alan said a prayer for their safe deliverance. They basked in the warm sun while a gentle salt-laden breeze bathed their faces. Philippe removed his footwear and began to massage his feet.

'We should make a move, Alan. If we're going to gain employment here, we need to show a little willingness. Here, take a drink.' Philippe passed over his goatskin water-carrier, and Alan took a long refreshing swallow. Philippe donned his boots and packed away their bits and pieces, then headed onward. As they strolled, Alan continually gazed in awe at the sea, tripped a couple of times, not noticing boulders on the road.

Further around a bend, they saw a most imposing vision. Made of large white limestone blocks, the castle was impressive. Philippe noticed a large wooden gatehouse built above a dry ditch moat. A massive drawbridge led to an inner wall that held yet another gatehouse within. Two armed guards stood around the entrance to the castle, stopping and questioning all who wished to gain entry.

As Alan followed Philippe onto the outer drawbridge to wait in line, Philippe grasped his arm, and spoke softly to him.

'I want you to leave all the talking to me. Just follow my lead.' he said gazing at Alan's unkempt beard and hair. 'Wait- I've changed my mind. We've got to go handle a small chore first!' he said turning Alan around, he pulled him out of the line and made him walk briskly back down the route.

'What?' Alan exclaimed, confused and bewildered.

'We're off to get a Norman haircut. I don't know why I didn't realize that

before.'

As they trudged off, Alan began feeling unwell. It was too hot for him. He held Philippe back, pulling his arm. Philippe halted in irritation before getting a good look at his brother. He motioned him to sit. Removing the water-carrier from his knapsack, bid him drink the water as they sat out of sight under the shade of an oak tree.

'You're suffering from mild heat exhaustion, Alan. I've seen the symptoms many times. The sea and hot sun can be harmful if you don't take care. We need to find some lodging. The most important thing is a meal. Tomorrow, we'll get ourselves a shave and a haircut.' Alan nodded, and lay back against the tree. His eyes rolled upwards as his head fell to one side then fell fast asleep.

Philippe checked out his brother and considered readying himself to take a nap too. First of all, he needed to secure their money. Using his dirt shovel, normally reserved for toilet use, he removed a sod of earth and dug a small hole. He placed their money into the hole, then replaced the grass sod over the top, and made himself comfortable. He was satisfied that if got waylaid in the darkness, their money will be safe. He sat down under the same tree as the snoring Alan and studied the wooded area.

Our surroundings seem secluded enough, he concluded, at least until tomorrow. He felt drowsy and a yawn took him by stealth.

He felt a hand upon his shoulder that gave him a start.

'Hello my beloved, Philippe. I am with you.' The sweet voice of a woman was in his ear, a voice he recognized well. 'Thora. Is that you dear?' He turned to look into the face he loved and cherished, the mother of their daughter. Thora moved to sit by his side. Philippe started to speak when Thora stopped him, kissing his lips softly. He fell into her arms and kissed her back longingly. He felt her breasts rise and fall, the beating of her heart thundered next to his. As their lips parted, Thora put a finger to his mouth. 'I've come to look after you, my darling, to see you're safe from any harm. No greater love has a wife for her husband than to give herself for the future of her family.' In his dream, he revelled in the softness and warmth of her lips as they once more sealed upon his.

CHAPTER THREE

A screaming seagull dropped a message upon his hand and Alan woke with a start. Warm sunlight bathed his face. He reached for his water carrier then took a long swallow. He wished the water was ale and missed not being able to draw from a barrel his share of his favourite amber nectar and sighed. He got to his feet and with the container in his grip he ambled down to the seashore, leaving the snoring Philippe sleeping.

He sat on a rocky outcrop looking out over the sea. The vast expanse of water fascinated him and he wanted to get closer. He sniffed the salt-laden air, taking in its subtle nuances; smells he never dreamed of awoke his senses. He stared out to the horizon where the sky met the sea and wondered what would happen if you sailed to the edge of the sea. He mused, would you fall over the edge? And if you did, where would you fall to? He had to know. He took another long drink, leaving enough for Philippe. He watched the seagulls swoop low

across the water picking up fish near the surface and grinned with boyish delight at gulls fighting over dropped fish, each in its own way, ravenously vying for food; his fascination with the sea grew ever stronger. The sound of crashing waves against the rocky shore fought for dominance over the calling gulls. He was falling deeply in love with the romance of the scene and wanted to be part of it.

'Over there is England, the home of the Saxons.' Whispered Philippe into his ear.

Alan started. If it were possible, he would have jumped out of his skin and the colour drained from his face. He had never expected Philippe to creep up on him like that.

'Jeez! I nearly had a stroke. Please, don't ever do that again!'

'That will teach you to be more alert.' Philippe said, grinning wickedly as Alan moved over to give him some space to sit. 'Do you feel better this morning, Alan?' he said, placing a large friendly hand upon his Alan's shoulder.

'I'll live. Now, what should I do about this shave and haircut? Do I need to cut off all my whiskers? I would like your opinion.' he asked, feeling as though he was about to lose a valuable asset.

'Na. I do know the Normans like to have the chin shaven, but you'll be fine leaving your moustache intact. It gives a soldier a sort of tough look. I was taught that if you desire someone to do what you want, you must look as though you mean what you say. Looking mean and tough is part of getting the job done. You would never see an effeminate looking man commanding troops. The men would laugh at him. He would never openly command respect. The tough look is an illusion. Have your head shaved closely, like mine, to the base of your head. My hair needs some attention, too.' he said, feeling the back of his head. 'As I said, it's all in the mind. In your case, it helps the officers know that you don't have rats living in there.' He rubbed the top of Alan's head, grinning as he did so. 'You know, I never knew how ugly you looked in the morning until now, Alan.'

Alan felt somewhat relieved that at least he could keep his moustache. He nudged Philippe.

'Huh, we're related. Is Normandy big enough to take on the might of two more ugly souls on its territory?'

Placing his arm around his brother, Philippe squeezed him tightly and laughed.

'Actually, Alan, in many ways we do look very alike. We're tall, dark-skinned and swarthy, with muscular frames and black hair. Maria once said that if it were not for your beard, we could be twins. She was wrong, of course; I could never be that ugly.' They both laughed.

Picking up their knapsacks, they set off down the road to find an inn, eat their fill, and tidy up. As they moved off, Alan looked over his shoulder at the sea. He would never get used to seeing such a vast stretch of water. Where was England? He needed to know, and what was it like? It was becoming an obsession. His thoughts wandered to the Saxons. He remembered Philippe had met some Saxons

on a few occasions at the market. They had spoken to him in French, but Philippe had said to him he could never quite grasp their heavily accented tones.

Alan was proud that he could speak reasonable English. Matilda's husband, Duffy, was Saxon, he recalled with affection. Duffy had taught him to speak the language well enough; unfortunately, other than Duffy, the dwarf, he had not met any Saxons with which to practice his skill. The dwarf's French was very good. He had taught Alan a few rude Saxon words too. Duffy loved to bait the priest with arguments about God unfairly punishing him. He, Duffy, being born with dwarfism, and the priest being born so ugly, it was a sin. Alan remembered Duffy with great fondness. Sadly, the amiable, but ailing Duffy died. Alan's thoughts drew him back to the sea and desired to ask his brother more about where exactly is England. He knew England to be an island. He had seen islands on lakes, big lakes, too, but he could not understand why he could not see England.

The brothers strolled along taking in the refreshing sea air while the seagulls screeched above and plunged here-and-there as if dive-bombing some unseen foe. As they rounded a bend on the path the sea was lost to sight.

Alan felt urgently the need to have his questions answered, and asked his brother to enlighten him.

'Philippe, how do you get to England? After all, if you can't see it, how do you know where it is and how to get there?' Alan scratched the back of his head, very looking very confused. It was hard for him to grasp the concept of not falling off the edge of the sea where it met the sky.

Philippe understood Alan's childlike curiosity. He was not going to make fun of him, or make him feel small. He would try to quench his desire to understand this new environment.

'You sail over there, of course,' he said, pointed to the sea. 'It's not too far, only half a day's sailing in some places, so they say. Sailors used a load-stone on a cord to point the way for them.' He tried explaining how the concept worked using load-stone as a compass, and saw plainly Alan did not grasp the concept and still none-the-wiser. 'There is, so I'm told, a lot of trade back and forth between France and England. The two countries have always been best of friends. The Normans, though, who are further south, seem to have a testy relationship with the Saxons. There is one place, in the north, where, if you stand in the right place, you can see England. I do not fully understand why, so don't even ask. You might find out one of these days.'

Alan wished he had not asked any questions. He knew about load-stone, but what would be the point of looking at it attached to a cord, and, how would that show a sailor where to go? He knew east and west, for that was where the sun rose and set, and the opposite was north and south, in relation to the sun. He thought Philippe might be running his rope a little.

'Look here, Philippe, you're pulling my leg, surely. If you sail to where the sky meets the sea you will fall off the edge. A blind man on a galloping horse can see that!' he said, tetchily.

'All I know is that men sail to England and then they come back. They have not fallen off the edge, otherwise, they could not trade with England. Go ask a

seafaring trader who sails out there. I'm sure someone will have the answer.' he replied flippantly, somewhat irritated. They walked on in silence.

They arrived back at the bridge and saw there was no one waiting in line on their side to cross to the other bank. They paid the toll and walked across the stout bridge. Philippe caught sight of an inn set back a short distance from the bridge and made their way over to the inn. In search of the hosteller, Philippe entered the premises wondering if the host was serving customers yet.

The morning sun, not quite in the best position to shed its warming glow kept the room in semi-darkness. The room was small, with just four oak tables with benches. Slatted windows, designed to keep out the hot afternoon sun were fully open, but let in little light. Another door led to what appeared to be the cooking area where sizzling food could be heard roasting on a spit. The spat, spat as grease dripped onto the open fire to enchant the senses of any hungry explorer. A third door led out to a brew-house yard. The smell of fermenting ale, an aroma set to delight the nostrils and wet palette of any traveller. Each table held a small candle-holder affixed with iron nails to protect it from falling. Thin protective slithers of cow horn were slipped around each candle to allow its dimmed light to escape, preventing its accidental extinction.

Philippe sniffed the air. The inn smelled clean and fresh, not puke ridden. He was used to foul smelling inns when frequenting such establishments with the French king's forces. He motioned to Alan it was an acceptable tavern and that he should enter the inn's portal. There appeared to be no one about.

'Service!' Philippe called out into the gloom. His voice reverberated; the echo came back a moment later, taking him by surprise. The brothers smiled at one another and seated themselves on a bench.

A young girl came scurrying through the kitchen door, her head bowed. Philippe thought her about seventeen years old and mused how quite pretty she was. The girl sported clean, neat auburn hair, tied back in a bun. He noticed she had a withered left arm and he wondered if it was it was a birth defect or the result of some accident. He noticed her apron had splashes of fat here-and-there, and she smelled of cooked chicken. He looked kindly at the girl and smiled.

'Yes, Sir - Ale or wine, if it's your pleasure, Sir?' the girl meekly inquired.

Philippe, knowing how to behave in such places took charge of ordering their fill.

'We would like bread, a roll of cheese so we might take it with us, and fruit of some kind. Oh, and could we have a couple of flagons of that wonderful brew I can smell to quench our thirst? Also, could we have some cooked meat or chicken, perhaps?' he requested further. He noticed the girl's face showed a resemblance to his daughter, Poppa. The girl sported a sweet smile that reminded him a little of his beloved Thora too. He innocently gazed at her nymph-like face. He detected her expression was one of caution and sensed she was careful not to offend. She stood back a little from the table listening intently to her guests.

'Yes, Sir - we have some chickens cooking now, but the red meat will not be

ready until afternoon. Will that be all, Sir?' she politely enquired. He looked deeply into the girl's eyes and noticed in them a sadness. He nodded. He felt an empathy with her but did not comprehend just why his feeling was so strong. Perhaps she is an orphan, he mused as he watched the girl walk away. He loosened his belt a little and made himself comfortable, addressing Alan as he did so.

'We ought to lodge here until we're enlisted in the duke's service. After that, we might have to sleep with the pigs, and I don't mean the four-legged variety, either.' he commented wryly, pulling off his heavy leather boots to massage his feet.

'I was so tired last night. Our journey was long and exhausting.' Alan replied apologetically. He had bucked up somewhat, adding, 'The thrill of the sights is just too much, Philippe, especially the sea. That is so amazing.' he exclaimed excitedly, as he got up and went outside to urinate against the wall.

He re-entered the tavern a moment or two later to see the girl carrying two flagons of ale. He face lit up as though Heaven had come for him. The girl placed the flagons on the table and scurried off back through the kitchen door. A short while later she returned with bread and cheese then repeated the process, bringing apples. Placing the fare on the table and smiling as she withdrew to fetch roasted chicken.

Recalling the room's acoustics, Philippe leaned over to Alan and spoke quietly.

'Did you notice her demeanour, Alan? Do you think this girl has been beaten, or abused in some way? She looks to be a frightened little soul. We should be extra gentle with her.'

Alan made no reply, he was staring through the doorway with a thoughtful expression.

Upon her return, she asked if there was anything else, she could afford them. Philippe spoke soothingly to her, smiling. He felt an overwhelming compassion and was painstakingly gentle in his phrasing to her.

'If you will excuse my asking, but we need a shave and a haircut. Do you know of a place we can go to get this done?' he asked. His head slightly to one side and smiled reassuringly.

'I shave my father, Sir. I give a good haircut, too.' she replied returning Philippe's smile.

He noticed the girl was more relaxed. It seemed obvious to him that kindness and civility was something she had not often experienced, though still she seemed cautious. He realized her customers could be from anywhere and understood her guarded reserve. He wondered why she was working alone. In his experience, some men tried to touch or grab at a serving girl, often kissing them forcibly; such serving wenches felt working in pairs safer. He hated such actions. His experiences often ended with him knocking such men to the ground. He sensed her curiosity and decided that when the time was right he would tell her about himself. Alan exchanged looks with Philippe. When either one of them spoke, Philippe noticed she turned her head, then realized her action was caused by their alien enunciation.

'We are not Normans, we're French.' insisted Philippe with a smile.

'I knew you weren't from here, Sir. Your accent is very different. It's soft and sweet-sounding, not like the raucous locals who always seem to be shouting at me, barking orders as though I were a thow.'

'What's a thow?' he asked.

'It's the Saxon word for slave or bond's man.' offered Alan.

'Thanks for the information, brother.' He returned his gaze to the girl, still smiling. 'Well, about this shave. I need to know how much you would charge for that, oh, and a haircut, too,' he asked, wanting to give the girl an opportunity to earn another smile. Her cautious guard dropped and she moved around to the side of the table to be a little nearer to him. She looked at the back of his head then glanced at Alan's unkempt bush and giggled.

'Do you want to look like the Norman soldiers?' she inquired before turning her full attention to Alan. 'This one might take some extra work, and with a scythe, too,' she teased, giggling as her fingers combed through Alan's hair. Philippe nodded in mock seriousness.

'He does look like something the dogs might have dragged through a brier patch.' He raised his hand to ruffle his brother's head, but Alan dodged, grinning.

'If you are staying, Sir, then tomorrow morning, when you finish your breakfast meal, I'll shave you both. There's no payment to be made as long as you stay one night in a room here.' she stated hopefully.

'I'm not sure that I need a haircut or a shave.' Alan complained, brushing back his thick black hair. 'I've grown this from a youth and I'm quite used to it.'

'Take absolutely no notice of him, and err..?' wanting to know the girl's name.

'I'm called Eleanor, after my mother. She's dead, Sir.' Philippe held out his hand to her. She looked perplexed as she allowed him to hold her hand in his.

'Please, don't be afraid, Eleanor. I too, have a daughter without a mother.' Philippe gave Eleanor's hand a gentle squeeze. His instincts told him that Eleanor was a good, honest girl, and he quite liked her. He noticed her demeanour became more relaxed.

'You seem to be such kind people. I wonder if I might ask- why you would want to come here to find work.' she asked with flagrant curiosity.

'We need work to feed our families, nothing more than that.' Alan replied.

'What is your story, Eleanor? I'm sure that you have many tales to tell about your experiences here.'

As they ate Eleanor told them about her father, who kept the inn; he was a deaf-mute. Duke William's father, Robert, had punished him many years ago, when her father was a boy, by cutting out his tongue for some long forgotten infraction. She could say no more, she had been too young to remember more than she had told them. Sympathetically they listened to the girl's story of abuse and mistreatment at the hands of customers. The brothers ate on, absorbing all that Eleanor had to say. As the hours past, she described how men would come into the inn on their way to the garrison looking for work. How they would get

drunk, mess about and fight with each other over the silliest things. She would hide herself away in the brew-house until the men left, often with out payment.

Philippe displayed his sadness that she was to deal with such ruffians. He leaned forward, cupping his head in his hands.

'It's odd that we've been the only customers in here all day, Eleanor. Why is this?'

Eleanor explained further, it was Wednesday, the day the troops train inside the garrison. You can gain entry, but no one leaves except messengers.

'It's just the rule.' she said, 'I've no idea why, and I have never bothered to inquire. The men garrisoned there are a law unto themselves. If you are seeking work there, you had better be good. They only employ the best tradesmen at the garrison. The fighting men do not come here. The artisans cause all the trouble. They have far too much money, too little brain and no noticeable common sense. Speaking of which, you both look like you could do with some sleep. This ale is very potent and you have downed three flagons each already. I will make a cot ready for you, but I must ask for payment first. We have hammocks too, as some men prefer them.' Eleanor smiled, hoping these kind men would stay. She felt at ease with them.

'Ah- a night's sleep in a real bed.' Philippe said sporting a broad grin. 'I think that's just what we need, Alan.' Philippe dropped a few coins on the table.

'Will this be enough, Eleanor?' he asked.

Eleanor counted the coins; there were six of them.

'I think it's a little too much.' she replied, giving him four coins back. She was not used to such honesty and looked startled. Philippe shook his head and opened his hand widely to her, indicating she could keep the coins.

'Go treat yourself to something in the market, Eleanor. We have been here all day, and we need to get a good night's sleep.' he said wearily.

She led them to a room that was small and sparse. To two tired men, it was comfortable enough, with shutters that made the room dark when closed. The room smelled musty, but they did not care too much. Anything was better than the previous night, sleeping on the ground. They fell onto the horsehair mattresses and within moments, both were fast asleep. Eleanor closed the door and left...

Alan awakened from a dream filled slumber. He opened the slatted window and peered out the window to a warm sunny morning. He left Philippe snoring, oblivious of the world. As he eased from the room, he noticed Eleanor, carrying trash in her arms, greeted him.

'Good morning. Are you ready for your haircut, Sir?' she asked, smiling. Alan nodded, feeling his face. 'Goodbye, beard, you will be sorely missed.' he mumbled.

'Follow me.' she said, beckoning with her head. He followed her outside where she had a bowl of warm, soapy, water ready for him. On a bench lay a badger-hair brush and some ash-lime soap. Eleanor picked up a fine blade, strapping it until the steel became super sharp.

Alan looked about the small yard enclosed by a high hurdle fence that was

obviously in need of repair. The yard was sparse. A small outhouse stood where oak barrels of freshly brewed beer nestled within its confines where Eleanor's father brewed ale. Alan mused that he could stay here all week. Yes, he thought, I could get to like this place, the aroma of sweet amber nectar and the smell of the the sea. He noticed how Eleanor had everything prepared and was grateful.

'I know how your hair should be. You'll trust me to shave your head correctly.' she said, smiling and offered him some hard cheese.

Alan thanked her, ate the cheese, and sat down upon a bench. He took off his tunic to reveal muscles that rippled at the touch of her soft hands. He bowed his head, while Eleanor, with a pair of sharp shears, began cutting his hair from the back. He requested that she leave his moustache intact. She clipped away merrily promising she would not injure his whiskers, and chatted on as if he was some old friend.

Alan closed his eyes and thought about Maria and the girls back home. He visualized the two girls playing with their grandfather and Maria milking goats. He wondered what they were doing and whether their grandfather was coping with the girls boisterous ways.

The soothing warmth of creamy suds on his neck and her dexterous strokes with a badger-haired brush relaxed him as she prepared him for his first day as a Norman. The shave was very close and he appreciated her deftness with the razor. As the sharpened blade did its work, he thought once more of Maria and the girls, then of Philippe. He hoped not to let his brother down and that he might eventually measure up to him.

From the door way Philippe spoke cheerfully.

'You sure look a pretty boy, big brother. Your face is now like a baby's cute little arse. I've not seen your face as smooth since you were twelve.' he said, bending forward, placing his hands on his knees, while tilting his head in a considering fashion, viewing Eleanor's handiwork.

'There you go, your fished.' she said tapping Alan's muscular shoulder. 'Just out of curiosity. You have not told me your names. I know that one of you is Alan and you are, Sir.' Alan laughed when he realized that they had not introduced themselves.

'I am Alan Domfront, and this is my esteemed younger brother, Philippe.' Alan got to his feet, wiping his now smooth face of residual suds. He moved and stood next to Philippe. Alan nudged him and they both bowed low to her. She laughed at the antics of the two buffoons standing before her, grinning.

'Well, Philippe Domfront, I do believe it's your turn to be given skin like that of an infant's arse. Will you please sit here?' she said, motioning with an outstretched arm toward the bench. Alan moved to sit on another bench, placing his feet upon a barrel, grinning broadly.

As Philippe removed his tunic, Eleanor gasped at the sight of his powerful muscular body.

'I've seen some men in my short life, but never a body so perfectly formed as yours. It is so beautiful, Philippe.' she said with a shy, almost embarrassed, look.

'I keep fit with special exercises.' he replied. 'Alan is, or was, our

village blacksmith. His muscles are in his head, but that's a story for another day.' he continued, grinning, wondering if his brother had caught his remark.

Eleanor cut away the locks of the most gorgeous hulk she ever had the privilege to witness, snipping and shaving as before. She daydreamed whimsically, felt her loins twitch and moisten and wondered if this should be the man to take her virginity. If they stayed another night, she thought, I would find a way for me to offer myself to him. She heard Alan mutter something and she snapped out of her fantasy. At last, she had completed Philippe's shave. She wiped his neck dry, once more admiring his muscular form as she did so. Alan sat biting into an apple, chewing as he spoke.

'You look every bit like a Norman, brother.'

'There you are, Philippe. Is not that the best shave you have ever experienced?' Eleanor stated confidently, stepping back to allow Philippe to appreciate her handiwork. Alan threw Philippe a dry linen cloth, which he caught, and preceded to wipe his face of suds. He spied a bucket of warm water, looked at his reflection and dipped his finger into it. Picking up Eleanor's soap, he dipped his head into the water.

From the inside came the sound of men calling, wanting service. The raucous voices echoed around the inn. It gave Philippe the impression that a party of apes had entered the tavern.

Eleanor felt pleased to have customers, and even more pleased that the brothers were there too. After all, she thought, men are less likely to mess about so much when strangers are around, especially tough soldier looking types.

'I won't be long.' she said, smiling. 'It's not unusual for customers to call out while I'm in the brewing yard.' she said as she turned to walk inside.

Philippe circled around Alan, nodding, admiring Eleanor's much practised art.

'You look very smart, Alan. Indeed seemingly quite the professional soldier.'

'I was wondering, do you think that I will pass the tests the Normans might give before they would hire me? I mean, surely they will want to know how much I know.'

Philippe ignored Alan's look of apprehension and drew a deep breath of clean sea air, smiled wryly and took the opportunity to pull his gullible brother's leg.

'You have to learn this battalion song by heart, Alan, or you'll be rejected. I'll sing it to you.' Philippe cleared his throat, and with a serious expression started his song.

'Big men with big balls will fill your heart with joy. When women see you-.' Philippe's improvised song seemed to go on forever and encouraged Alan to join in a raucous, impromptu chorus.

Eleanor was relaxed as she entered the public drinking room. Thinking her new friends might become regular customers, and perhaps, close and dear to her lifted her heart. She shook off more thoughts to give her full attention to the four men waiting for service.

Two were sitting on one of the tables, while two others sat on a bench. They were grinning, perusing her body in a way she had seen before. She was accustomed to such attention, but hated it. She wondered if she should return to

the yard to ask the brothers for their presence.

That way, these men might not try touching her breasts or reaching under her gown to interfere with her most private and intimate parts. She moved toward the men cautiously, keeping out of arms reach while looking at each of them in turn. Her senses heightened with the consciousness of danger as their grinning subsided, and, for a moment, there was silence. The only sounds were seagulls, the rumble of a tumbril passing by and the clopping of hooves.

'Food and ale, girl, and be quick out it!' The order came from a man whose beard had grown down to his waist. 'We don't want any stale bread, either.'

All four men were scruffy and unwashed, with little to distinguish one from another, apart from the length of their beards and the colour of their hair. For a moment, Eleanor was startled. She noticed there were four flagons already on the table. Cheese and bread lay scattered around, partly hidden from view. She had not noticed them when she walked into the room. She would do as they asked. She would not antagonize them. Realizing her father has obviously served them while I was shaving Philippe, she thought. She heard Philippe singing in the yard, and wished he were beside her.

'Yes, Sir, I will go and bring fresh bread and ale.' Eleanor's tone was matter-of-fact. She turned towards the kitchen area and began to walk away. Her eyes lifted to something hanging before her and she almost bumped into it. Her chin dropped in horror and her legs began to tremble at the sight of her father hanging from a rope thrown over a beam above. She felt faint. The scream, which she so desperately wanted to emit, eluded her. A hand reached out to grasp her arm and turned her around. In one movement, her gown ripped from her to reveal the nakedness of her youth while another hand grasped her throat.

Eleanor knew nothing of the rape. She had passed out with the fierceness and shock of the strangulation. When they were each done with her, two of the men lifted her defiled and naked body onto a meat-hook that hung from a ring attached to a beam, its sharp point penetrating the back of her neck and entering the base of her brain.

He laughed at the silly song he had made Alan learn. He looked towards the inn, curious. He put his finger to his lips and made a shushing sound. His eyebrows lowered and his head tilted slightly to one side. There was not a sound. Philippe spoke in a concerned tone.

'There's something not quite right here, Alan. I think we'd better take a peek inside.' He walked the short distance to the entrance, beckoning Alan to follow. At the doorway, Philippe stood aghast at the horrific scene.

Peering over Philippe's shoulder, Alan realized the four strangers had not noticed them entering from the yard doorway. With his fists clenched, his face flushed, and, silently, he began to rage. His face pulsed with anger and he lost control. Philippe pushed against Alan, propelling him to cross rapidly to the opposite doorway, blocking any escape as Philippe continued covering the yard exit.

'Your fun is over, gentlemen!' Philippe roared emphatically. Finally, the

four men realised they had company. Philippe noticed Alan was about to lunge at the group and raised his hand, cautioning him to hold back. He took from his belt a long dagger, its blade as sharp as a razor's edge. He chose his victim and began to pace out the steps toward him. He reached out pulling the devil by his chin's growth as the man attempted to scramble away. Philippe's blade entered the man's throat and the man fell to the floor, his blood spurting and pumping from a severed artery. The man he shuddered for a moment and was dead. The three remaining men looked about at each other, searching for an escape to the street, but there was none.

Alan withdrew his sharp blade, a flash of steel rapidly turned end over end, locked on its target, the knife pierced the villain's heart and another man slid, with a look of astonishment to the floor. Alan had learned his brother's lessons well. The Domfronts moved menacingly forward as their remaining victims recoiled, with their backs now firmly against the wall, cowardice written upon their faces.

Philippe stared menacingly into the eyes of another murdering rapist. His boot shot out at the man's groin. Its objective engaged, and as the man bent double, Philippe bore upward with the thrust of his knife, shoving the man's head backward as the dagger entered his throat. Pulling upwards on the knife, the blade sliced the man's head almost completely off. Blood pumped and spurted from the dying man, covering Philippe with hot, vile, crimson slime, which had so recently pumped through the abominable veins of an evil reprobate.

Alan bent down, never taking his eyes off his next intended fatality. His hand felt for and removed his knife from the cadaver sprawled in a bloody heap, then strode with agonizing purpose toward the last, shaking, cowering cretinous toad, the remaining vestige of a foursome of vagabonds who had known no respect for human life. It was now this man's turn to die. Alan grabbed the man by his throat, easily pushing the struggling toad down to the floor.

Philippe bent down and yanked the man's belt from around his waist. With the back of his hand, Alan cuffed the man's head, rolling him face down and gripping the terrified man's arms, pulled them behind his back. Taking the belt from Philippe, he tied the belt tightly around the man's wrists while the sobbing criminal whimpered, calling for mercy.

Philippe strode over to the remains of the sweet Eleanor. He lifted her gently off the meat hook, and moved towards a table clear of any items. Tenderly, he laid the girl down upon the boards, his face streaming with tears for a wonderful creature taken so soon and in such a vile way. Not a single word uttered throughout the episode until Alan placed his arm around his brother.

'We have to take her father down, Philippe.' Philippe nodded and then glared in the direction of the pathetic turd that lay squealing, pig-like behind them. He turned back to gaze once more into the face of a beautiful girl. Raging, he swivelled about and lunged forward. He bent down to grab hold of the murdering bastard who lay at his feet. The man rolled onto his back, his knees coming to his chest. Philippe growled.

'It is time for you to get up!' The man struggled awkwardly to his feet as Alan assisted him to rise, with a hand grasping the rapist's hair. The man stood

shaking uncontrollably, saliva swelling the wretched killer's unkempt beard. The low, guttural, wheeze squeezing from his larynx filled the room, as Philippe bodily lifted the man above his head. In anger, he stalked the short distance to the position where Eleanor had died and placed the man on the same bloody hook on which his last victim suffered.

'Die. And die slowly!' he muttered, grimacing through clenched teeth. As the implement entered the villain's brain, the man began to shake violently as he hung, impaled upon his own device of death. His eyeballs stared, bulging. At last, the man slipped into unconsciousness, receiving his just demise.

Alan had never before seen his brother take the life of another human being. He felt almost ashamed at what they had justifiably done. Alan untied the noose, while Philippe eased Eleanor's father down from the beam. He carried the man outside and laid the lifeless body down upon the earth. A crowd began to gather outside. The noise became a riotous uproar as shouting and calling came from the mob outside.

Philippe strode briskly back into the room. Gently, he picked up the girl in his arms and walked to the door that led to the street outside. The crowd pushed forward as he held the girl to show what the men inside had done to this child and her father. Tearfully, he told the crowd the cause of the commotion. He was shaking with anger, his distress vehemently evident. Three tall soldiers wearing mail armour pushed past the crowd, ushering Philippe back inside, following him. Philippe took Eleanor's body to the backyard and laid her down beside her father.

As one of the soldiers entered the yard, he saw Alan on his knees, crossing himself as he said a prayer for the couple who had died defending his business. The tallest soldier, who appeared to be in charge approached Alan and spoke gruffly.

'What the hell happened here?' He stood in astonishment, his mouth gaping in awe of the bodily destruction around him.

Alan was on his knees, desperately trying to compose himself, a tear streaming down his face. He turned look up to gaze up at the soldier standing above him.

'These gentle people were murdered by the men you see laying dead.' Alan replied. He got to his feet then went back inside the inn.

The man gazed down at Eleanor and her father, then returned inside to gaze inquisitively into Alan's face. Alan stood wiping the tears upon his sleeve.

'What was your role in all this?' the soldier asked, and listened intently as Alan relayed to him the story of the morning's events.

'So you're looking for work, then?' the soldier asked with an almost unconcerned attitude toward the carnage. Alan nodded affirmatively.

'Yes, it's why we came here, but where is my brother?' he asked, looking around bewildered. 'Have you arrested him? They put the girl, Eleanor, on a meat hook after raping her, and hung her father from that beam.' he said, pointing to the beam above him.

'Your brother is still outside, with the girl's body.' the man muttered. 'The situation is quite clear. You are obviously innocent of any crime, at least as far as I can see.' the soldier replied.

Philippe knelt beside Eleanor and said a prayer. He stood up and returned, morosely, inside. He gazed at the soldier, half caring of his presence until he noticed an ochre-coloured band on the soldier's left arm, denoting that he was a sergeant. Sewn onto this was a green stripe, indicating an elevated rank. The soldier twirled his thick, bushy, ginger handlebar moustache that grew around to his ears, as did his brother's. His bright blue eyes peered over his button nose, exuding a kindly, almost a fatherly look. He was tall, taller than Alan was, but not as tall as himself.

'My name is Sprig. I am the Master Sergeant here. I am satisfied there has been no crime committed by your hands. Therefore, you are free to go.' He turned to leave, then halted and spun about. 'Oh yes, I forgot to mention something. The law states that under such circumstances, if there is no other relatives, you now take on the responsibility of the business. I wouldn't like to say spoils, but for the want of a better word, the place now belongs to you.'

Philippe was astounded. He and Alan gaped at each other. Philippe called out, 'Sergeant Sprig- I am Philippe Domfront and this is my brother, Alan. I must ask if you know of this family's relatives living in the vicinity.' he asked earnestly. One of the other soldiers whispered into the Sergeant ear and shook his head.

'No, no one. It looks as if you now own the place. Oh, yes.' The sergeant gazed in Philippe's direction. 'You're looking for work, eh? We need good men, such as you. If you are still interested, come to see me in the morning. Ask for me by name at the main gate. I will leave word with the guards that you are expected. There's no income in running an alehouse, at least not in this town. My men get food and ale. It's part of their allowance.' he said as if it were an afterthought.

'We'll sleep on it, Sergeant.' Philippe replied. 'Meanwhile, we need to give these two good souls a Christian burial.' he said, looking toward the yard door.

'I'll see to it that the four bodies inside get thrown into the river for fish food. I like honest men. I'll see you in the morning then.' Sprig replied with a wink. Philippe half smiled back.

'Err, Sergeant. Is there a means of delivering messages from here? A courier service of sorts? I need to write to our family back home. They need to know that we've arrived here safely.'

'Are you telling me you can read and write?' Sprig asked, startled.

'Of course, Sir, we are both literate.' Philippe scratched his head at the sergeant's astonishment, forgetting they were not normal, illiterate, plebeians.

'You're hired! Be at the barracks at noon. As I said, I will see to it that you are expected.'

'Yes, Sir, at noon.' he replied and stood to attention. The sergeant nodded and walked through the inn and into the street, giving orders to his men to dispose of the murderers bodies in the river.

Alan began looking about the premises for implements with which to dig two graves. What he found were not the sort of digging tools with which they were accustomed. He came across a couple of deer antlers and a shovel made from the shoulder blade of an ox and a wide wooden shovel used for shovelling grain into

the brewing cask. Nevertheless, they made do with what they had, and began digging. Philippe found some linen cloth and used Eleanor's shears, which he used to cut into sizes suitable enough to wrap the cadavers. They laid the bodies into the grave, placing stones around the edges. They filled the graves with earth and placed more stones on the top. They knelt beside the mounds, with Alan beginning the prayer that would speed their souls to the arms of Mother Mary and Jesus.

'I could find neither nails nor cord with which to secure a cross, Alan. Alan placed a hand upon Philips shoulder.'

'I don't think God will mind too much. Crosses are for the living to remember the graves position and to place posies on, nothing more.' He looked to the sky above him. 'The light is beginning to fail. I think we need to get some rest. Tomorrow we have a long day ahead of us.'

CHAPTER FOUR

The events of the last few days had taken its toll on Philippe. Despite Sprig's promise, he knew that if they did not get work, they would have to return to Charles farm with what money they had, and though it was a great deal it would not last long. He painted a bleaker picture than it really was, but wanted to work out some form of contingency plan, but was at a loss for ideas.

As he searched about the inn for bedding and other useful accoutrements, a myriad of thoughts filled his head. The previous days horrific and torturous moments haunted him. He had never before killed in cold blood and never wanted to again. He knew he had to put behind him all thoughts of killing and could not allow his judgement to be clouded by past events. He was a professional, trained to kill, but not that way. There had been too many deaths, two of them at his hands, and he had sinned.

From the window, he spied Alan kneeling, making the sign of the cross beside the twin grave of Eleanor and her father, then make his way inside the inn.

He called out to him, 'It's going to be a hot day, Alan. It will probably be cold tonight.' He showed Alan the bedrolls he thought would make good bedding. Alan felt the weight of the packs.

'The other men are going to think we are a couple of soft townsfolk. Philippe. Do you think, we ought to move toward the castle?' Philippe nodded, and in silence, picking up their knapsacks they left the inn.

As they strode briskly away from the hostelry, Philippe turned to look back at the inn. He put his sadness forcibly aside, feeling invigorated by the newness of the day and their imminent employment. He could not help noticing the absence of people. The only signs of life were two dogs, copulating. Perhaps, he thought, it was too early for townsfolk to be up-and-about, for when they came to the toll bridge there was no one around to take their coin. They crossed the bridge and climbed the steep cart-rutted road toward the castle gates. It was too early to gain entrance, so they sat under a shade tree for a while discussing what options, if any, would be offered them.

Philippe had noticed Sergeant Sprig was seriously impressed with their literacy and had wondered what their talent for letters might do for them. He

reminisced to the days when their eldest brother, Henry, who had gone into the priesthood, eventually to become their local priest. Henry would coach his young brothers. Greek and Latin had become as easily as French to them. Henry had taught them linguistics almost from the time they could walk. Numbers and letters came as natural to them as leaves grew on trees. His mother, father, and Henry were now dead. It all seemed, he thought, so very long ago

The sun was high and it was time for them to move on. They approached the drawbridge, advancing confidently towards two soldiers standing guard at the castle gates. The younger of the two soldiers saw their approach and stood to attention. Philippe mused that their neat, soldierly appearance had had some sway on the youthful guard. The other guard was about thirty, tall and scruffy. He carried a permanent sneer while sporting a disproportionately hooked Roman nose that gave him a comical, goose-like appearance. His eyes were set so close as to be almost touching, thought Philip. The elder guard held onto his spear, treating the weapon as if it were a crutch, slouching as though he were about to slide down his spear.

He looked at the face of this slovenly excuse for a soldier, and realised this is why he was on guard duty, a punishment for some misdemeanour, perhaps.

The older guard spoke to him with a Breton accent that Philippe understood well enough through his encounters with them in previous years.

'What's your business here' asked the older guard, sneering.

Philippe stepped forward and with an air of authority in his voice boomed,

'We have been hired by Master Sergeant Sprig. He told us to report to him at noon.' He glanced at the guard's face, not liking what he saw.

Philippe didn't regard Bretons highly as fighting men, though he knew they tended to be loyal to their paymasters. He noticed an ocher coloured band tied round the Breton's right arm, just like sergeant Sprig, but with no green stripe, indicating that he was an under-sergeant, though just how he became a sergeant was a mystery to him. He had come across men of an ugly disposition many times and learned to put up and live with them.

'You can enter,' said the sergeant, nodding carelessly over his shoulder to the private, gesturing for him to open the gate.

'Yes, Sergeant Waddle,' the young soldier replied, pushing open the heavy door.

The brothers picked up their knapsacks and walked inside. Philippe entered first onto a sand-filled courtyard, an arena. He recognized it as a speciality training ground for war-horses. In the right-hand corner were boys grooming magnificent destrier warhorses. To his left were stone buildings. He thought they might house the duke's troops. Some wooden buildings of better quality, standing on short stilts rose next to them. He wondered if mounted knights might billeted there when called to do service. He noticed the main stone building was square and strong, being some four stories high. It probably housed the duke, his family, and his personal servants, he mused. The white, limestone walls held small glazed windows set in lead frames with slatted shutters that could pull closed, keeping out the hot summer sun.

He turned to see Alan stood looking in awe. He turned toward the sound of a

blacksmith working an anvil. In the background, he heard the unmistakable sound of huffing and puffing of bellows. He caught the scent of horses, the odour of fresh feed. He noticed two men using pitchforks filling a cart that held the aroma of horse-dung, reminding him of home.

Along the battlements, guards were patrolling, occasionally looking out to the flat sands of the sea and the estuary below them.

Two men in the stables were in conversation, and one, whose back was to them, was taking instruction, nodding whilst preparing to mount a horse. The man mounted a pure white destrier mare and began to canter around the yard. The horse's snorts echoed loudly around the arena.

The brothers stood watching as the rider approached the objective, which appeared to be a small square grey board placed upon a pole measuring a man's height. With careful aim, the rider speared the centre of the target and with another skilful movement withdrew the lance as he rode past.

Philippe, impressed by the rider's skill and agility turned to Alan.

'That was excellent! Did you notice how he did that? That takes dexterity and years of hard training.' he remarked admiringly. The adrenaline began coursing through Philippe's veins. He continued to watch the rider swing around and repeat the manoeuvre several times. The riders practised art fully honed to perfection.

While following the motions of the rider, something caught his attention. A lone figure some way off was placing heavy hessian sacks, filled with sand, against a wooden wall. Philippe's attention strayed from the rider and watched the man set up sticks, varying in thickness against the sacks. He shuddered and knew what was about to happen. The scene brought visions he recalled from his days in military training. He cautioned Alan that they should move into the shadows, out of the hot sun, so that they would be more comfortable and yet still be able to observe the activities. Against the glare they became almost invisible to all that might look their way. He nudged Alan to look in the direction of the man placing targets against the sacks. Peering across the courtyard, they watched the man walk back some distance from the target, wet his finger and hold it up into the air. The man was carrying a weapon that Alan had never before seen. It was a short, rectangular wooden object, no more than the length of a man's arm. Across one end of the device was affixed a wide bar made out of a material he could not quite distinguish. Alan's curiosity got the better of him, and wondered aloud what that man could possibly be doing with this curious-looking implement. He became utterly engrossed in this intriguing enigma.

'It is a crossbow.' Philippe volunteered. 'It is the one weapon you would do well to avoid.' he said, turning sharply, looking seriously at his brother.

'Believe me, Alan. If one of those arrows, which they call bolts, were to hit you from close range, it would likely pass right through your body. At three hundred paces it would do you serious damage. You had better remember. They are just as dangerous in inexperienced hands too. I've had training. Crossbows frighten the daylights out of me. Never stand in front of a loaded crossbow. Some men have less brains than a carrot, just beware.'

Appreciative of his brother's explanation, Alan watched in continued fascination, as the man strode away from the sacks to take up a position at a mark he had made in the sand. He pulled back on the thick sinew cord, setting it gently onto the cock. As he did so, the prod curved backwards like a bow, its composite spring fully tensioned. The bowman carefully loaded the bolt onto the stock. Taking careful aim, he released the bolt and it shot through the air in a perfect arc to split the narrow wooden target in two. The crossbowman loosed six perfectly aimed shots at the targets, splitting each stick in two. Philippe winced.

'You look troubled, Philippe,' he said noticing his brother's frown. Philippe glanced at Alan to whisper conspiratorially, explaining why.

'As you saw, in the right hands the crossbow is a highly accurate and lethal weapon, Alan. Do you see the stock? It is maple wood, which as you know is hard and very tough when left to season. Take a close look at the prod-that is the crosspiece at the end of the stock. It's barely flexible, and tough. Made from layered sinew, wood and horn. It will never break.' He went on to explain that a lot of work had gone into such a weapon and would have taken a year to create, made specifically for this man. 'Men such as he are loners. They talk with few men. They are a breed apart and not to be trusted,' he said, his tone strangely distant.

'Are you telling me that the duke has hired this man for a special mission, to kill an important person, perhaps?'

Philippe placed his hand upon Alan's shoulder and spoke with a warning inflection.

'Yes, Alan. This man is a hired killer, one who specializes in seeking out and destroying high-ranking and heavily guarded people.' and wondered who this man's victims would be; kings, dukes, earls and other rivals, perhaps.

Philippe recalled hearing about assassins, but had never seen one in the flesh. He had heard they were an expensive, but convenient and private means of elimination.

'Such men, Alan are meticulous in the way they seek out and annihilate their intended victim. He is here in Normandy for one specific task. When that service has been discharged he will be handsomely paid, then seek employment elsewhere. In some instances, this man's actions could decide the fate of a nation. The thought of such men roaming the country irks me.' He noticed Alan's gaze and saw his fascination with the crossbowman and watched brother's hand as it reached for his chin, obviously, wondering how the mind of such a cold-blooded man could work.

He wanted to move on and motioned Alan to follow him. They they made their way across the courtyard while keeping in the shadows, close to the wall, until they reached the stables. He called out to the stable-hand, asking the whereabouts of Sergeant Sprig. As he did so, Sprig stepped out of the stable into the bright sunlight sporting a broad smile, obviously, pleased to see them. Sprig's harsh, buttoned-nosed face hid a kindly interior that Philippe recognized even at the inn as being akin to that of their father-in-law, Charles, and had taken an almost instant liking to him.

'I knew you would come.'

'How would you know that?' asked Alan naively. Philippe tapped Alan's heel.

'Let me just say,' Sprig said gleefully, 'that intelligent, literate men are few and far. You keep hold of a good resource, and for our mutual benefit, we should look after each other.' Sprig said, motioning them to follow him to the stone billet. They trailed him through a heavy oak door. The door, made from heavy vertical planks held together by iron straps and pointed rivets were imposing. Inside, the room had a number of low-to-the-ground cots that carried horsehair mattresses. Around the walls were hooks where higher-ranking soldiers would hang their equipment. Some were in use, with various pieces of clothing hanging from the clasps. Against the walls, hung kite shields. Oak beams above them held racks of spears and practice lances. Philippe was impressed with the accommodation. This fine largesse was something the French king's warriors had lacked. He had to sleep in a hay barn with other lower-ranking soldiers while working for his king.

Philippe noticed Sprig glance in his direction, and saw by his demeanour the sergeant took him as worldlier of the brothers and directed his conversation toward him.

'There are two free cots at the end of the room.' Sprig said, nodding towards an area further into the gloom.

Philippe strolled past a round stone fireplace that sat in the centre of the billet, dropped his knapsack upon the bed, and sat down. Alan hung his equipment on one of the hooks next to the free cot. He glanced up to see Sprig approaching.

'Well,' said Alan, commenting as he looked about the room. 'I can't fault the accommodation, I see you look after your men, Sergeant Sprig.'

Sprig took this opportunity to sit next to Philippe. He gazed at the brothers, glancing first at Alan and then Philippe.

'I would like to know what brought you to Caen and why you want to work for the duke. Your actions at the inn tell me a great deal about your characters.' Sprig stated, patiently awaiting a reply to his request, his gaze now focused upon Philippe.

Philippe began their tale, and Sprig sat in silence, listening to the long, drawn-out details that had placed the men in his path. After a couple of hours, Sprig heard the last words that brought him up-to-date.

'By the balls of Lucifer, that's some story, Philippe!' exclaimed Sprig, aghast. 'I'm sorry that it was at the hands of my fellow countrymen that set you on your journey here.' Sprig said apologetically, with genuine empathy.

From the door, a young boy made his entrance. He was about five feet tall, with blond hair cut short in the man's fashion. His bright blue eyes sparkled as the light from the slatted windows reflected off his face.

Philippe glanced up, catching sight of the young man whose fair skin and flaxen hair gave the boy an angelic appearance. He wondered at the boy's age and settled for thirteen years. He watched the lad capably roll along a small barrel of ale. The boy, struggling, picked up the barrel to place it on the table upright next to some flagons. He punched a wooden stopcock into the bunghole and

turned to leave the room.

'He is a good boy. His father is Saxon.' he said gazing fondly at the lad.

'Oh?' Alan said, looking surprised. 'What's he doing in Normandy?'

'His father is here with the diplomatic service. They'll be travelling back to England soon.'

'Oh—really?' Alan replied, acutely interested and wanting to know more.

'Yes. The duke has close ties with the English king, Edward. It seems the king is soon to meet our lord.' Sprig replied, leaning forward, beckoning them both to lean towards him. 'I'm told— and this goes no farther, mind you—that Duke William is to be the next king of England.'

Philippe noticed Sprig puff with pride at having such inside knowledge.

The door creaked as the blonde-haired Saxon boy pushed it open, carrying bread, cheese, and freshly cooked chicken on a wooden platter covered with linen cloth which he placed on the table. The boy rushed out the room to return a few moments later carrying another platter, offering the trio the salver containing green apples.

Philippe was surprised Sprig would be treating them to a meal in this way. It was as if he and his brother were dignitaries, but guessed it was Sprig's meal break, and as he had company, he organized his time with them this way.

'Will there be anything more for your needs, Sergeant Sprig?' asked the boy.

Alan took the opportunity to ask Sprig a provocative question.

'Would you mind if I tried my English with the boy, Sergeant? It is suffering from serious disuse.' Sprig gave a nod of approval, and Alan at once jumped at the chance.

Alan cleared his throat. 'Err- good afternoon, young man. What name are you known by?' he inquired, hoping that the boy grasped some of his English and smiled again at the boy's start of surprise. The young man took a deep breath, then paused for a moment, turning to look uncertainly at Sergeant Sprig.

'Might I reply to the gentleman, Sergeant? He speaks in my mother tongue words I have not heard for some months.' the boy said, elated at the thought of using English for a change.

'Of course, but don't be too long in your conversation, Guthrin, we have work to do.' he said, winking kindly at the boy. Guthrin turned to Alan.

'I am called Guthrin, Sir. I recognized the accent of a man from Kent. Is that where you are from?' he asked confidently.

'No, I'm French, and so is my brother.' Alan replied, gesturing to Philippe. Philippe listened eagerly, straining to comprehend the odd word.

'My father is Saxon, Sir. He works for King Edward. I am very pleased to hear your English, and you speak my tongue extremely well. Only two people here I know who can speak English. The monk, Cecil, who is also the duke's ambassador, is one, and the other is a man I only know as Eumer. You might see him shooting with his crossbow in the courtyard. You might speak with him while you are here.'

'I've never been to England, Guthrin. I learned to speak your tongue from an Englishman who once lived in my village. He was a wonderful man, a dwarf, actually. He was a strange fellow with an odd sense of humour. Now, would you

please supply me with a flagon of ale, and one each for these men?'

Alan nodded in polite conclusion, pleased he had actually understood every word the boy had spoken, despite the natural speed of the boy's speech.

'Yes, of course, Sir.' Guthrin replied with an ear-splitting smile.

Alan reached out and playfully rubbed the boy's head. Guthrin strode swiftly over to the ale barrel and began filling flagons with the bitter amber nectar.

'I'm sure that you'd like England, Sir, with its rolling hills, dales, and windmills.' Guthrin remarked as he placed the flagons on the table. Sprig motioned the boy to sit beside him and placed an arm around the boy, pulling him close. Looking down at the lad, he gave the boy's shoulders a gentle squeeze, looking at him affectionately.

Philippe wondered if the sergeant had taken the lad under his protective wing.

'I love this boy as my own son.' Sprig said. 'There are few boys that have the qualities I see in this young man. Indeed, his father has instilled in him the seeds of greatness. Only last week, Guthrin performed a deed that few men would have attempted, and did so fearlessly.' The brothers leaned forward as Sprig continued his story. 'Toli, a white destrier mare, was bitten on the fetlock by one of Duke William's dogs, as a warrior-in-training, began to mount. The horse bolted. Taken by surprise, the rider was stuck. He was dragged roughly along the courtyard, attached to the horse by his foot caught in a stirrup.' Sprig spoke of how Guthrin had gained a special relationship with Toli through his hours spent with the horse constantly grooming her in the stable. Sprig, extolling Guthrin's bravery spoke of how Guthrin stepped bravely in front of the charging animal, and Toli had come to a shuddering halt before him. Guthrin calmed the alarmed horse with soothing words, gentle touches; blowing his sweet breath into Toli's nostrils.

Philippe gazed admiringly at Guthrin, and realized just why Sprig was beaming pride from every pore of his being.

'You were brave, indeed, Guthrin.' Philippe said, 'Your relationship with Toli must be very strong. I, too, have such a horse. Her name is Bigger. Indeed, she is a fine destrier. I understand how you fostered a love and understanding with your four-legged friend.' he held the flagon to his mouth and quaffed his ale before offering the boy the empty container, indicating with a nod that a refill was in order.

Sprig turned his attention to Alan and Philippe with a serious air.

'Tell me, Alan. Would you be prepared to go to England?' he asked, smiling wryly at Alan's look of astonishment at the mere thought.

'As I have said, I've never been to England. In fact, all I know of Saxons is from my Saxon friend, Duffy, and what Philippe has told me from those Saxons he has met at the village markets. I would be lost in such a strange country.' he replied, looking uncertain as to what Sprig might have in mind for him.

Sprig placed a hand upon Alan's shoulder.

'When King Edward dies, the new king will need officers; intelligent men, such as yourselves to control the Saxons. I will need to speak with someone higher up, because I might have an important task for you two to perform. We

would have need of translators for giving and receiving orders, that sort of thing.' he said, looking back and forth at the interaction between the two men.

Philippe took on the challenge.

'I know that I speak for both of us, Sergeant. We'll do what is required.'

'As I said to Alan, intelligent men are hard to find. What I have in mind is more important than policing territory.' he said, looking pleased with himself. Philippe appreciated Sprig's candidness, and wondered why Sprig would take a risk with them. After all, he thought, he does not know us, or we him.

'My instincts,' said Sprig, 'are driving me to do something I have never before done. I have spent less than half a day with you both, yet the compulsion to speak with our envoy, Cecil, on your behalf is overwhelming. Tomorrow, Cecil is to travel to England. I had men chosen and ready to do travel with him first thing in the morning. The decision as to who is to accompany Cecil, within certain bounds, of course, is my responsibility. Philippe, Alan, I need to be about that business. So, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I will leave you to sort out your things.'

Sprig stood up, and as he walked briskly out of the billet, beckoned Guthrin to follow him. Guthrin looked at Alan and smiled, and then turned to shadow Sprig out the doorway.

Philippe sat with chin in his hands, realizing that Sprig had garnered their trust and a healthy mutual respect as well. What worried him was Sprigs' treatment of them as more than equals. Nothing made sense. Sprig should have given them a billet and barked orders, as was the way with ordinary soldiers. Master Sergeants were not supposed to be friendly, they show authority. They are to distance themselves, aloof, set apart from the common soldiery. Philippe had been a sergeant and could not understand Sprig's behaviour toward them, treating them as betters.

'Well, Philippe, what did you make of all that?'

'Search the Lord's heart, Alan. It would seem that Sprig has a job for us in England. Though just what that might be, I could only guess, but I have no doubt we will find out soon enough. For now, I guess we had better unpack our knapsacks and sort out our things.' Damn! Philippe thought. He did not get to speak with Sprig on the matter of pay. 'Arse to my forgetfulness.' he mumbled, frowning. He pulled the heavy backpack over and began to untie the cords that held its contents firmly within. Alan lazed back, placed his arms behind his head, and began to whistle a tune.

'Damn it, Alan! If Sprig walks back in and finds you posing like that, we might find ourselves hung,' he remarked in a serious tone. 'Follow my lead and do as I do. Speak as I do. Soldiery is a serious business, or you might find yourself strapped to a post and flogged. I'm serious, Alan. You're not in your bloody workshop.'

'Would you care for another drink?' Alan asked absently, rising from the bed he ambled over to the table. Philippe shook his head. He knew, but never understood Alan's partiality to ale, and he could see he quite liked this ale, but and then again, Alan liked any ale. As long as it was wet and amber looking, it was okay by him, he mused. Alan refilled his flagon, slugged a drink, and

belched appreciatively. Grinning broadly, he poured out a second flagon for Philippe. He turned to Philippe, with both vessels, when from the doorway, came a great clattering. The raucous sounds of men laughing and chattering filled the room. The noise, startling him, caused him to spill a little of the ale.

A body of men, ten in all, made their boisterous way into the room, but gradually, all talk ceased. Alan realized the men, as they ambled to their cots were staring at him. He looked over his shoulder at Philippe and shrugged. He guessed they had not expected two strangers to be waiting for them. In silence, they all sat on their cots, some pulling off their boots, studying the new arrivals. Alan blinked owlshly into the dim expanse of human intrusion as the ale continued to drip from the flagon.

Philippe turned about and strode to the centre of the room, passing by Alan, standing motionless. He gazed about the room slowly and deliberately, before bowing low. As he straightened, he puffed out his chest proudly, placing his fists on his hips as he proclaimed in a stentorian tone.

'My name is Philippe Domfront and I'm an arrogant bastard. Behind me is my brother, Alan. He, too, is an arrogant, but dumb bastard. We prostrate ourselves before you.' Philippe and then fell face down on the floor. The room filled with riotous laughter as men approached to pick up this giant buffoon from the planking. One man stood directly in front of him. Grinning broadly, he held out his forearm. Philippe grasped the man's arm tightly, and felt himself yanked enthusiastically to his feet.

'Well, Philippe Domfront, you arrogant clown, I welcome you to the madhouse. I have no doubt you will fit right in. I am Robert-of-Bec.' Robert guided Philippe around to each man in turn. 'This is Robert—this is Robert—this is Robert. We are all named Robert, except for one.' Philippe laughed so loudly the roof could have lifted off its walls, as the room once more became an unruly din of cheering and raucous humour.

Philippe turned to see his brother standing with his mouth agape, the flagons still in his hand, as another Robert approached Alan, his right arm offered in a friendly gesture and the left taking the offending leaky flagon.

From the doorway, a lone figure appeared, carrying a knapsack. He strode to his cot and threw his pack to the floor beside the bed before sitting down to remove his boots, sporting a gruff look upon his scared face.

Philippe gazed blandly at the figure that had just entered the billet, and noticed the man sneering at him. He bore a scar extending from his right ear in an arc to his cheek, ending at the lip, worsened the man's gaunt features. Philippe noticed the man wore an under-sergeant's armband.

Robert placed his back to the under-sergeant and moved his head close to Philippe's ear.

'That is Sergeant Snap. He is as mean a moron as you will ever come across, and you would do well to avoid him. He is dangerous. Keep him in front of you at all times. Our masters only tolerate him because he will take on those tasks that others utterly refuse to perform. We are not killers, despite our work, but him, he's mad, like a rabid dog. Snap has a hawk-faced sidekick who goes by the name of Sergeant Waddle. You might have come across this chap at the front

gate.' Robert led Philippe further into the room behind the fireplace, out of Snap's sight.

Philippe spoke softly. 'We bumped into Waddle this morning. There was something about him. He looked distrustful. I have gained an eye for such men, Robert. Am I to understand that Snap gives the orders around here?' he asked earnestly.

'Unfortunately, yes. But we try not to take much notice of him. Master Sergeant Sprig is a good man. He keeps Waddle and this lunatic apart as much as he can, because together, they cause havoc. I happen to know that if Sprig could rid himself of those two reprobates, they would be out of here, quick as lightening. Not so long ago in the town, they both raped the young daughter of a merchant. The law here says it is acceptable if you do such a thing inside; outside, it is a hanging offence. We all have wives and children, so we don't take kindly to that sort of behaviour.'

'We think along the same lines, Robert. My impression was that all the people here would be Normans. Some of you, I noticed from your accents, are French and others from elsewhere.'

'We come from many different places, Philippe. Most of us worked for the king, others for various Germanic princes. For the most part, we all seem to get along well.'

Guthrin entered the room, making a beeline for Robert, who smiled affectionately at him.

'Sir- Sergeant Sprig wishes to speak with you right away, and Cecil wants to speak with Alan and Philippe. Cecil is on his way here, even now.' Guthrin nodded respectfully at Philippe, who winked back at the boy. Robert gave a gentle push to the boy's back, ushering him ahead.

'I'll be right along, Guthrin.' As he strode off he glanced back at Philippe.

'Well, I'd best go see what Sprig wants and then we can all eat.' On his way through the door Robert met Cecil and nodded appreciatively as he allowed the monk to pass.

Cecil stood looking about the room, searching for the new men amongst the milieu of masculine physiques. Alan, recognizing a monk's habit, sidled up next to his brother. He had blearily missed the finer subtleties of Philippe's earlier introduction and was feeling a bit unsteady on his feet as his mild inebriation began to conquer his legs, but was grateful his head was clear. He looked at the floor, studying the small sandalled feet peeking from the hem of the monk's robe.

'Alan and Philippe?' enquired the monk. 'My name is Cecil,' he said, dipping his head politely, and began to speak clearly in perfect Latin.

Philippe's eyebrows lifted. He had not expected Latin at all, let alone as a first speech.

'It has been brought to my attention that you are both fully literate in Latin, and some Greek, too. One of you, Alan, I am led to understand, speaks extremely good English. Please, I wish to converse awhile with you. Would you follow me to my quarters?' he said, gesturing towards the door and walked off

without waiting for a reply.

The brothers looked at each other and shrugged, before following the monk out into the bright sunshine, and then walked through another small doorway a few paces from the main billet room. As he entered, Philippe noticed a table with a high-backed chair behind it, and seated on a bench opposite were Sprig and Robert-of-Bec.

Philippe stood with Alan against the wall near the doorway, its stone masonry, refreshingly cool. Cecil moved around the table to sit on his chair. He pushed some parchments to one side and took a drink from a flagon. Cecil continued speaking in Latin slowly and methodically, choosing his words carefully. He had noticed Alan's slight inebriation, his eyes crinkled with mild amusement.

'Our ale is potent, Alan. You might be watchful of your consumption.' he said grinning, then turned to Philippe. 'Now, I need to know where you were born, your parents' names and your current situation with regard to your families.' Philippe thought it odd that Cecil mentioned his family, and assumed that Sprig had spoken of his desire to contact them, recalling his conversation with Sprig the day before.

Philippe spoke carefully, his Latin nearly as perfect as that of Cecil. Philippe's slight accent brought another smile to the monk's face. It seemed to take an eon for Philippe to tell his story, when at last Cecil interrupted him to speak with Alan.

'Can you corroborate your brother's story, Alan?' he asked, wishing to hear his Latin.

'What my brother tells you is correct. Philippe has left out some of the finer details as to how we arrived here, but those are of no consequence to you, I'm sure.' Cecil looked impressed, nodding, then switched to converse with Alan in English.

'I'm not so sure of that. Please continue in English, if you will.' Alan gazed searchingly at the monk and saw an inquisitor of immense learning. He was grateful that the ale was only affecting his legs and not his thought processes.

Cecil leaned back against his chair, hands prayer-like to his nose as he gave his full attention to Alan's explanation of the final events, nodding now and again in comprehension of his admirable linguistics. Alan told Cecil how they came to be educated. He told of the ambush during a pilgrimage to Rome, their family, father and mother, along with their brother, who was also the priest, and from whom they learned languages had been brutally killed by the robbers. He explained how Charles had found him and his brother cowering in the bowl of a tree. Charles killed a wild boar about to attack them and how Charles had taken them in to his home and brought them up as his own, and much more. Cecil and Alan conversed back and forth until, finally, Cecil raised his hand, indicating that he had heard enough.

'You may now be seated,' Cecil said motioning the brothers to a bench across the room, his gaze unfathomable. For a few moments there was silence. The only sounds were the extraneous noises of courtyard activity mixing incongruously

with those of the birds chirping merrily in the summer sun. Suddenly, Cecil slapped both palms down upon the table, ale sloshing over the flagon's rim to run off the table and onto the floor.

'Well, gentlemen. I think we have found two worthy companions for tomorrow's journey to England!' Cecil gazed at Robert, smiling broadly. 'Two of your boys can stand down, Robert. I am sure that you will understand my reasons, and your chosen two will not be too disappointed by my decision, as there will be other opportunities to travel. Unfortunately, there is one position that I cannot replace, and that is by the duke's order.' Sprig glanced across the room at the men before sporting a broad grin. Robert stood up and thrust out his hand to Philippe and then to the ailing Alan.

'You lucky buggers—you've been here only half a day, and now you're both fucking generals! Welcome to the party, boys. It is just unfortunate that we will have that toe-rag Snap with us, but I guess it's better than having Waddle in our company. I'll take great delight in informing him that he is to remain behind.' Robert said, beaming away as if it was Christmas day.

Philippe found it difficult to suppress his satisfaction, and for reasons he was not sure of, everyone including Cecil, laughed aloud.

Cecil raised a hand in an attempt to quell the multiplying humorous remarks.

'Gentlemen, Please,' Cecil called, trying to suppress his own mirth.

The merriment subsided to something approaching partial normality, allowing him to continue giving details of the next day's events to the brothers.

The plan was, at first light, six of the duke's finest horses would be taken down to the coast, where they will be loaded aboard a boat to take them across to England. They would reach England before nightfall at the port of Dover, where Earl Leofwine would meet their embassy. He will escort them, along with the horses, to London. There they are to present a horse to each of the earls and one to King Edward himself. The men would spend a few days in the king's company and then they would return to Normandy. Snap was to stay outside the city, keeping guard.

Cecil looked please with himself.

'It is as simple as shelling peas from a pod. Your job,' he said, glancing at Philippe and Robert, 'will be to see that our charges are looked after, because Saxon pirates would love to waylay us and take our precious cargo. It has happened in the past, even though we have the king's protection.' Cecil took a long drink from his flagon and continued. 'When spoken to by any of the king's earls, you will answer politely. In your case, Alan, you're to reply in English. Philippe, you are to reply in Latin. We have to show these Saxons just who their educated masters are. I alone will converse with the king. He might wish to say a few words to you. If so, then bow low and reply, 'Thank you, Sire.' Step ten paces in reverse and only and then will you stand to attention. Under no circumstances are you to turn and walk away from the king as if you were strolling across a courtyard. Not to do so is the greatest insult to a king. If, by some remote chance, Earl Harold approaches you, you are to say nothing unless you absolutely must. If questioned by him, you will use these words. 'I apologize, my lord. I am unqualified to speak on such matters. My master, Cecil,

will be able to answer all your queries.' Earl Harold is a dangerous man to know. When the time comes, we will deal with him in our own way. For the moment that is all you need to know.'

Sprig motioned at Cecil, vying for his attention.

'Yes, Master Sergeant, you have a question?'

'I think, Sir that we ought to discuss remuneration with these fellows. It's never been mentioned. After all, this task is not exactly what you'd call normal duties.'

'Ah, but it has. Philippe and I discussed it in fine Latin. It's all been organized, including sending a good portion of their pay to their families.' Cecil replied smiling broadly. 'You made a fine choice, Sergeant Sprig. I commend your good judgement. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to speak with the duke.'

As Alan staggered out into the hot sunshine, he noticed Guthrin riding around the courtyard on the back of Toli, with one of the Roberts giving the boy instruction. Toli was a large destrier warhorse, much larger than a courser. Despite her enormous size, she was nimble, with a forgiving temperament.

Sprig made his exit and stood next to Alan.

'Earl Harold is to receive Toli as a gift. Such a fine warhorse, don't you think, Alan?'

Alan nodded groggily, but could no longer reply. The excess of drinking had taken control of his facial muscles, and he wondered if this vicious brew was deliberately searching for other areas with which to play games upon him.

'Our ale is really potent stuff, Alan. You would do well to moderate your intake until you become accustomed to its compelling strength.' Sprig said, then turning to Philippe, noticed he was watching the boy's progress with interest.

'You may be wondering, Philippe, why it is Toli that is to be given to Earl Harold. Of all our fine mares with which you are to cross to England, Toli has a special temperament, one that Harold Godwinson would appreciate. I am informed the Earl holds a valuable position with the English king. When the time comes- well, let's just say that if Earl Harold cooperates with us, there will be rewards beyond his wildest dreams. He controls a powerful nation. With a weak and ailing King Edward- well, we must bring Harold subtly under our wing. We don't want his power going to his head, now, do we? We will steer the good earl to where and with whom his loyalties lay. Diplomacy is a learned art that takes years of training to attain. Any away, I have spoken long enough on the matter. We need to rest, because getting horses aboard ships makes for hard work. Go settle your bones and be fresh for the morning's tasks.' Sprig turned to the ailing Alan, and looked at him sympathetically, almost as a father would to a child.

'Alan, I think you'd better go and drink some boiled water. It will do you good.' Sprig bid the group good day and strolled away to his private quarters, leaving the men to their rest.

The men slept soundly through the night, with only Philippe noticing Alan's bilious heaving from the courtyard outside; his retching and spewing upsetting

him more than it did Alan. Alan at last staggered clumsily through the door of the billet and fell onto his cot, declining into a deep slumber where the vivid flashes of dreams took him back to the inn. He looked across a distorted room, and stared into face of the man he had killed, the man's terrified expression haunted him. The shock and horror in the face of an individual who knew that he had but a second longer to live flashed into his mind's eye-knife- face- knife-face-. Watching the lethal instrument of death leaving his hand, turning end over end as it travelled effortlessly through space; its blade piercing the flesh of the man he was sending to eternal hell and damnation. The thud and sharp crack as the heavy implement broke through the chest cavity, splitting the mature bones of his victim echoed in his ears.

Philippe shook Alan's shoulder, jarring him awake.

'I'm guessing you've the aches and pains of a hangover.' he said as Alan peered blearily up at him. 'Your pathetic look cuts no ice with me, Alan. It's a self-inflicted wound, and you should be bloody well hung for your stupidity.' Philippe gestured, wagging his finger under his brother's nose. Alan grunted and then retched, no longer able to bring up any more bile. The previous nights' gastric ejaculations left him a pathetic and lethargic loss.

'My legs cramp while my stomach knots from such a venomous brew. I feel bloody awful. Every muscle in my body aches. I'm never going near that stuff again, ever!' Grasping Alan's shoulders, Philippe yanked his ailing brother to a sitting position. Alan's head drooped to his chest. In retribution for a lost night's sleep, Alan felt a sharp slap to his cheek. Philippe's eyes narrowed; his normally placid temper stretched in unfeigned annoyance.

'You have about as much time as it takes to shit to get up, get outside, and get in the bloody saddle. If not, I will hang you by your bollocks. Have I made myself clear? Now, get off your fucking arse and move it, or I will kick your stewed butt out myself! For you, Alan Domfront, drinking is finished. You're coming with us, ill or not.' Philippe looked over his shoulder and grimly nodded to the group of grinning Roberts. They roughly hefted the ailing Alan to his feet. His leg cramps crippled him, causing him to be half walked, half dragged outside to the courtyard. Another nod from Philippe motioned toward a horse trough. A huge splash from a body hitting water soaked everyone. The cold of the contents brought the useless Alan back at last to the land of the living. A wealth of laughter, followed by myriad hands helped the soaking Alan from his aquatic clinic.

Sprig ambled over to the men standing around the partially revived Alan.

'I see Alan has been drinking in the trough. I shouldn't let on to the horses, they might get a wee bit upset at the prospect of someone thieving their drink.' he quipped, as more riotous laughter echoed around the courtyard.

Philippe gathered his knapsack and had his own private chuckle. He listened with interest as Sprig snapped orders and supervised the morning's final preparations.

'Attention!' barked Sprig, his voice bellowing loudly enough to wake the sleeping and dead alike. The men in the courtyard moved to stand in line for Sprig to take a roll call. 'Robert-of-Bec, Philippe, Alan, Snap, Eumer; load

your personal belongings and any other equipment onto the tumbril. The rest of you, mount up! Cecil should be here shortly.'

Sprig strode briskly about, checking each saddle and patting the leg of each mounted traveller before finally reaching the intrepid Philippe.

'Good luck to you, Philippe. I am sure you will discharge your duty wisely. Keep your brother away from excessive quantities of ale. If you can do that, I'm sure he'll be just fine.'

'Have no apprehensions, Sergeant. I feel Alan has learned his lesson. He is a good man, despite this disagreeable interlude. It has been many years since the last time I had to cajole him from such a wretched state. No, Sir, you'll have no cause for later concern on that matter.' Philippe straightened in the saddle, his confident smile designed to reassure the sensibilities of a good and wise master sergeant. He looked across to Alan and saw steam rise into the still air, giving him an almost ghostlike aura. Sprig nodded approvingly, and then turned his attention to the soaked but revived Alan. Sprig looked up, into Alan's clearly embarrassed face. He reached out to touch Alan's knee.

'You know, Alan, you remind me of a brother I lost to smallpox some eighteen months ago. Don't go causing any wars between England and Normandy, eh.' He grinned, and patted his leg.

Alan replied with a reassuring nod, reinforcing a much-dented pride. Alan looked after the sergeant with renewed respect as Sprig strode over to Eumer and Snap. Sprig glared up at the expressionless face of Eumer sitting passively astride his mount, before passing the same displeasure on to Snap.

'I don't want to hear any reports of you misbehaving, Snap. There are plenty of men here only too eager to take your place.' he seethed. 'You're with this party only to see that the horses and men arrive without incident. Deliver safely your gifts into the king's keeping, then return immediately. Lift just one eyebrow in the wrong way- then I will hang you myself.'

Snap's shoulders moved in the semblance of an acknowledging shrug, his head dipped in Sprig's direction, his face carrying juvenile sneer, that in any other circumstance would have given Sprig the opportunity to have Snap flogged.

'Yes, I hear,' replied Snap in a tone akin to that of a contemptuous teenager.

Sprig returned his attention to the vacant eyes of a man for whom he had even less affection.

'I don't even want to know what your role is here, Eumer. Whatever it is, do it, and then leave. I never want to see your face in my barracks again.' Eumer made no movement, his silent insolence obvious.

Cecil strode briskly through the doorway, followed by servants who struggled laboriously to carry his large trunk. He looked on as they filled the tumbril with his personal accoutrements. In irritation, Sprig turned to stalk in Cecil's direction.

Cecil leaned towards him, smiled.

'The time has come to register a new beginning in the annals of history, John. In a short while, God willing, we will be part of a royal household. What is more, it will be accomplished without a cup of blood being spilled.'

The sound of dogs barking echoed around the courtyard, when, as if from nowhere a tall, fit, and very muscular man stepped from a doorway. All heads turned to look as the man stepped briskly with the dogs by his side.

Philippe just managed a glimpse at the duke out of the corner of his eye, when Sprig called the men to attention again. Philippe watched as Duke William of Normandy, the man he knew by reputation to be vicious, murdering, cunning and tyrannical, strode over to Eumer and the contumelious Snap. He studied the duke as he approached Eumer, who bent down toward his paymaster. This encounter, he realized, was very personal, observing the tableau, and deriving amusement at the frustration upon Snap's face as Snap strained to make out the words of intrigue, but to no avail.

'You know what must be done.' whispered the duke. 'You will have the rest of your payment in gold as soon as you have discharged your service to me. If anything should go awry, though, you must leave England immediately. You have never been to Normandy, nor have we ever met.' William passed to Eumer what seemed to be a bag or a purse, perhaps, which Philippe guessed to be payment.

'Are you perfectly sure of your target?'

'Yes, My Lord; I am fully cognizant of my intended quarry. You have no reason to feel any doubt as to my resourcefulness. I have had plenty of time to observe him and to plan for the event in detail. I leave nothing to chance. Of that, be fully assured. There will be no trace or evidence that would lead back to your person.' Eumer replied as he took the bag of gold. He placed it deeply into his saddlebag and sealed the compartment securely.

William patted Toli upon his neck, before approaching the now mounted Cecil.

'You're to make it clear that Toli is to be presented to Earl Harold, and that it's a special gift from me, personally. Subtly remind him of his oaths and promises. Harold is to secure England for my arrival upon the death of King Edward. One more thing- you've never before in your life clapped eyes on Eumer, is that clear?' William stood authoritatively, leaving no question as to what he meant.

'I will carry out my orders to the letter, my lord. Indeed, I know of no such person bearing that name, nor do any of the other gentlemen in our party.' Cecil whispered. William nodded, his lips pursed tightly, pivoted about to return to his private apartments followed by his obedient dogs.

Cecil called out to the waiting men.

'We ought to now make our way to the coast, because the tide waits for no man.' Cecil said looking about the company. He gave a nod to Sprig that they should get moving.

Sprig called for the gates to be opened and the mounted men trotted across the courtyard and out to the track beyond. Philippe and Alan brought up the rear, followed closely by the tumbril.

As they rode down the steep hill, Philippe remarked how calm the sea looked.

'I can't wait to experience the sea first-hand.' Alan said, excitedly. 'It's just like being a kid again.' recalling the excitement of discovering uncharted territory. He was going to gain a whole new understanding of their environment, to experience something new that is totally amazing, and to sail on a real ship,

on such a vast stretch of water.

As the party began to ride across the bridge, Robert dropped back to join the brothers and took up the centre position between Philippe and Alan. On the other side of the River Orne, the riders grouped into two lines of three; Cecil, Eumer, and Snap at the front. They trotted past the inn where, not so long before, all hell had broken loose and where now only sadness occupied its empty remains. Philippe leaned a little towards Robert, his curiosity getting the better of him.

'Tell me, Robert. What else do you know about Eumer and Snap?' whispered Philippe.

Robert leaned toward him, sporting a serious look, and they slowed their pace a little, allowing those in front to get clear. Robert was cautious with his speech, for fear eavesdroppers he whispered.

'I know from experience, Philippe, that Eumer can only be a hired killer. I have seen him practising with his weapons. They are the types of weaponry used by men who can afford only the very best. I'm guessing he's an assassin. If you ask me, he is to kill King Edward. You saw the duke speaking to him. He gave him something that looked to me suspiciously like a sack of gold. And then we have that thieving bastard, Snap. As I told you before, he is a maniac. He would kill a man for farting too loudly. With him, you should never leave anything other than a slug alone. He will steal anything remotely profitable. He rapes children, too. The moment I get a chance to be alone with him, I will kill him and send him back to his father, the devil!' Robert seethed.

Philippe began to wonder if Robert had already planned Snap's death, or, if he'd at that moment decided that since he now had allies, he might just as well ask for assistance in Snap's demise. Philippe thought it best to say nothing.

As they turned into the port the sea was clearly visible, with hundreds of boats of every kind either anchored or drawn alongside jetties. The men made their way down the gentle slope towards the jetty, where two ships were awaiting their arrival. Cecil dismounted and strode down onto the landing stage to meet with the captain.

One hour later, the horses and baggage were loaded aboard the two ships. The neap tide was high, the breeze blew from the south, and the ships slowly began their journey to England, the land, Cecil had said, of milk and honey.

'Bloody hell!' Alan cried. For the first time in his life, he tasted the salty sea. 'Merde. This is undrinkable filth!' Philippe just smiled, shaking his head as he watched Alan feeling the briny ripples flow through his fingers. Alan turned to look back at the coastline slowly receding behind them. The horses do not seem to mind the rocking, he thought. He glanced over at Philippe, seated, his head resting on his arm, before turning to see what Robert was up to. He saw him feeding large seagulls stale bread. He moved to sit beside Philippe, his concerns still troubling him.

'Are you sure we won't fall off the edge of the sea?' he asked with a mixture of excitement and just a little trepidation. On hearing the question, Robert looked back and smiled, before slowly shaking his head and returning to the task of feeding the hungry seagulls.

'I'm quite sure, Alan. We'll be just fine,' Philippe replied, gazing aimlessly out to sea. Alan noticed another boat with full sail heading their way, but paid it no heed until he heard the captain's yell for all men to come to arms.

'Pirates!' The cry came from the coxswain, as an arrow pierced the coxswain's shoulder. As he spied two bowmen popping up over the far ship's side Philippe shoved Alan down behind the railing. While scrabbling to get to his weapons, his peripheral vision caught sight of Eumer appearing from the far side of the mast, where he had been indolently lazing.

Showing no apparent emotion at the sudden mayhem breaking out around him, Eumer withdrew his crossbow from his carry-sack, loaded the weapon, and took aim. The shot entered the head of an opposing bowman who fell into the water.

As the boat drew alongside, Alan got to his feet, and Philippe, once more, dove headlong into his brother, knocking him back down behind the rail as another bowman loosed a shot. He heard Snap's footsteps pounding across the deck, his curses harsh as he looked for some sort of advantage against the pirates making ready to board them.

Philippe looked over his shoulder in time to see Snap seize the grappling iron, and with one mighty heave, threw a grappling hook aboard the other ship. Realizing Snap's intent and their sudden advantage, the captain made a grab for the rudder and swung the ship around, pulling the smaller pirate ship side-on. The wind caught the pirate ship's sail and with the weight of the pirates on one side of the now unstable vessel, the attacker's boat capsized. Snap sliced through the grappling rope, watching with wicked glee as the pirates fell overboard. Meanwhile they all gathered around the stern to watch the ship sink beneath the waves, the frightened screams from bobbing heads diminishing as the wind and distance took them on.

Philippe assessed that the danger was now behind them and turned his attention to insuring his fellow-travellers were still all with them. He eased his way over to remove the arrow from the coxswain's shoulder, instructing Robert to hold the victim on his side and still.

'You'll live, but this is going to hurt.' Philippe stated grimly as he pushed the arrow through the man's flesh to reveal the bodkin. The coxswain fainted with the pain as Philippe snapped off the arrow's point and pulled out the shaft. From his bag, Philippe removed a linen shirt, ripped it into shreds, and dipped the linen into the salt water. Using the whetted cloth, he cleaned and dressed the wound. He placed the arrow against the man's arm as a splint, and then he tied the coxswain's arm into a sling.

'Where did you learn to do that, Philippe?' Robert queried in admiration. Philippe gazed up at Robert, 'I did my allotted time with King Philippe. You learn a great deal as a service-man in the royal household. The training was good, even if the remuneration was poor.' he replied, realising his remark was becoming repetitious. He smiled, almost embarrassed, and looked away. He felt a bonding, a sort of closeness toward Robert, a kind of kinship, yet he deemed it odd that an attachment was forming between them, for they had known each other for barely a day. He felt a hand upon his shoulder and turned to look into the

smiling face of Robert.

'And then I'd better stay by your side, just in case, eh.' Robert breathed as he patted Philippe affectionately, before he noticed everyone ringed around them.

'I'm surprised to see that the horses didn't panic.' Alan blustered, gruffly. Snap stumbled on the wet and rope strewn decking.

'The horses are trained to ignore rough weather on board a ship; they'd be no bother.' Snap sneered as he moved off to resume his unconcerned position, near the bow.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the distance rose the white cliffs of Dover, looming ever closer. Everyone gazed in awe at the majesty of the tall, fortress-like cliffs protecting the sacred portals of that sceptred isle called England.

Philippe noticed Alan had gripped the side of the boat throughout their journey and lightly patted his back, remarking that falling off the edge of the sea might just be a sailor's tale after all and could see his brother was grateful they had come through their nautical experience unscathed.

The high neap tide made for an easy landing, for which everyone was visibly pleased, especially, Cecil, who made his way toward the bow of the ship to give a bag of coins to the vessel's master. The ship drew sedately alongside the quay, but before disembarking onto the jetty. He looked about for the reception party that was to meet them, then noticed a group of tall men. He looked on, assessing six muscular Saxons approaching, striding briskly along the jetty toward them. After an acknowledging nod to their gesture of obeisance, he carefully studied their skill with the gifts he'd been entrusted to deliver.

He looked on, impressed by Saxon equine proficiency. The horses never panicked during their sea crossing, he'd remarked to Cecil admiringly. He recalled monk explaining how the horses trained as foals to become accustomed to being loaded on and off ships.

He recalled being told they lose the odd horse overboard, but it was to be expected. The Lord is so proud of our breeding of them, that he occasionally takes one back for himself the monk had remarked to him. He had noticed Cecil's obvious pride in Duke William's special stables for the procreation of such fine specimens. He'd agreed there were none in the whole of Christendom that could compare with these wonderful animals.

Philippe offered his steadying hand to Cecil who smiled appreciatively and was off onto the jetty with one easy step. The men strolled along to the end of the beach onto dry cobbles to the safety of English soil. There they met Sargent Snap standing next to his mare. Snap's sneer seemed etched upon his face and Philippe wondered if he was born with that look and felt sorry for the mother who birthed such a child, recalling Robert had commented on the journey that Snap's mother should hang on the bow of the highest tree for not throwing the baby Snap down a well. He had agreed, discussing the possibility that she too had been as ugly as her son. Either way, the journey seemed shortened by the light hearted banter. Robert, he thought, made a good companion; seemingly a trustworthy friend.

The men gathered round Cecil who wanted to pray for their good sea crossing.

'We shall say a Mass for our safe deliverance. All kneel,' he requested, but it sounded to Philippe more like an order. The men knelt to take the bread and wine. Cecil glanced across at the sneering Snap, a man he despised only a little less than he did the cruel assassin, Eumer.

'Are you not going to join us in thanking our Lord for our joyous deliverance, Snap?'

Glancing up, Philippe knew of course that Snap was never going to heaven, but he knew the monk had to ask; and wondered if Cecil would place a curse on Snap.

The men all gazed toward Snap who had moved his steed further away to be with the other horses. Snap's disrespect was clear to all. He watched, sneering, as the men took the blessing of the sacrament. Cecil glared pointedly at the heathen, then as he intoned,

'And the devil will, one day soon, receive evil men into his fiery bosom-Amen.' Cecil crossed himself, as did the men kneeling in prayer. Philippe gazed in astonishment at Snap's blatant disrespect for the monk and disregard for God. He wondered what Robert thought of Snap's position.

'Truly the devil rides within this man.' Robert spat on the ground. Philippe shrugged and slowly shook his head. As long as he left him alone he could handle Snap. Such men eventually gain their comeuppance anyway, he thought. He wondered about Eumer. He had not cast eyes upon him since they landed and asked Robert of Eumer's whereabouts. He knew something was afoot when Robert too had realized he had not seen Eumer. Philippe was thoughtful as he spoke to Robert.

'If the English king has named the duke as his heir and Edward is dying then what do a few extra months matter to the duke to wait for a few more months?' he said, intrigued.

Robert looked with baited curiosity at him, raising his hand to his chin, wondering if Philippe would indulge him in a personal debate.

'It would be my guess, Philippe, Eumer's target is Edgar, the Ætheling. He would be the one to be disposed of in any dispute. After all, it's not beyond reason that Eumer's quarry could well be one or even several of the king's archbishops. It could be Ansgardus, the commander of the Saxon garrisons, or he could be targeting Brithnoth, Edward's top man and commander of the king's housecarls. Whomever he might be setting out to terminate, I just hope he doesn't cause a war. What are your thoughts?' he asked Philippe cautiously.

Philippe knew nothing about the English line of succession, nor did he care, but tried to follow Robert's informed lead.

'Could there be a war between England and Normandy.' Philippe asked rhetorically. 'It would not take an intelligent man to see that England, with all its vast resources, would defeat Normandy. Don't misunderstand me, Robert. I'm not saying that the Normans aren't strong, but from what Alan told me, England is much larger in size than Normandy. So, it stands to reason that the Normans just don't have the manpower to fight England and win,' he assured them.

Alan listened with interest, trying to put this puzzle in order; butting in, he asked,

'That's interesting. Do you think Earl Harold wants to become king?'

'Earl Harold,' replied Robert, shaking his head emphatically. 'Nah. Harold has made sacred oaths with the duke. He's William's man, all right. Not so long ago Duke William summoned Snap to escort Earl Harold back to England after making his oaths. From what I could make of the situation, the earl seemed to be happy with whoever is king. In any event,' continued Robert, 'the duke needs Harold alive, to run the country for him.' he replied, knowledgeably, but was interrupted by Snap's raucous call.

'Attention!' Snap barked to the waiting men. 'Stand to receive Earl Leofwine.' Despite their dislike of Snap, the group complied and stood in line, to attention, and it seemed to Philippe it was the only they would do for him.

Striding toward the quay a tall man sporting a magnificent ginger moustache and hair down to his shoulders approached. He was about thirty, well built, and looking very healthy. His bright blue eyes seemed to shine at anyone who gazed into them. Leofwine strode straight toward Cecil, his arms outstretched.

'Cecil, how are you, my good friend? I see they're still starving you in Normandy then.' Merrily, gesturing toward monk's large frame. 'You need some meat inside you.' his deep, guttural, voice boomed in gesticulative mirth.

'It's good to see you again, Leofwine.' Cecil replied, motioning the earl's gigantic muscular frame towards the horses.

'Are these not the most beautiful beasts you have ever seen?' Leofwine stepped forward, inspecting the animals closely, admiring their superb equine form.

'Indeed, they are, Cecil.' his expression changing to one of deep concern.

'Unfortunately my good friend, I can't offer you the normal hospitality that would be due upon your all-too-infrequent visits.' he retorted, grimacing at the look of shock upon Cecil's face. He was to explain that the king has ordered a general muster, as a test of his forces against attack. His orders were that everyone, including Cecil's envoy, must leave while his military carry out manoeuvres.

'I'm sorry to be the harbinger of such bad tidings, Cecil. You and your entourage will have to return on tomorrow's tide. The late summer storms made it impossible to get a messenger across the channel to inform you of the situation. I'm as disappointed by all this as you must certainly be. I really am, but orders are orders. I have no influence at the king's court.'

Alan listened closely to this conversation, interpreting under his breath each spoken word to Philippe. Noticing Alan's whispering Cecil took Leofwine to one side, out of earshot.

Cecil was sure there was something more to know. He was determined to get to the truth.

'What's behind all this, Leofwine? Come on. I'm your friend; you can tell me. What you say will go no further. You have my word. Have I ever lied to you?' Cecil placed his hands upon his hips. Even for him, this stance was unusual. He knew this posture intimidated the weak brained Leofwine. The monk was resolute and would gain an answer from this man, even if it took him all day. Leofwine's palm went to his forehead, rubbing it.

'If I tell you, it shall stay in your heart, is that understood?' Cecil

nodded affirmatively, waiting anxiously.

'We have Intelligence there may be an imminent invasion from Magnus, Svein or even Harald Sigurdsson. Oh, curse it. I can't remember. Don't ask me why-I'm not part of the inner circle. All I know is what I'm told, and that is precious little. I'm sorry, Cecil.' Leofwine looked flustered at having only half a story and no other explanation to offer.

Alan moved conspiratorially closer to Philippe's ear.

'Uh, oh. It looks like the shit has hit the wind,' he whispered, straining every neck muscle, trying to gain an advantage on the extraneous noises around him. Alan was shaking his head sorrowfully. 'The journey's over, boys; we're going home,' he reported, sporting a forlorn look. His adventure terminated before it began. His head drooped, his dreams dashed.

Robert craned at Alan, trying hard to catch his attention.

'What the hell is going on, Alan?' he whispered. Robert cursed himself for never taking the trouble to learn the Saxon tongue.

'Who knows?' said Alan with a shrug. 'I didn't quite catch all that was said. Cecil is looking annoyed about something. All I could make out was that we are to return on the next tide.'

Cecil saw clearly Leofwine's rambling was born of frustration; his mumbling brought on through nothing more than embarrassment and it irritated him. Leofwine stuttered on.

'Oh yes-In October, the king will be sending a delegation with some sort of offer to the duke, with, I suspect, terms of establishing a Norman garrison at Dover. It's all so confusing because the king is messing everyone about. Nobody knows what's going on in his head, Cecil, honestly. Anyway, you are to return next month. The king will welcome you here at Dover personally. In the meantime, Harold has asked that you lodge in his own quarters atop the cliffs. Cecil, do you know how hard this is for me? I feel so bad about this. I am the one chosen by the king to do the shit jobs. I'm a warrior, not a storyteller!' Leofwine explained, dropping his head shamefully. Cecil patted Leofwine's shoulder reassuringly, slowly shaking his head and chuckling softly.

'My old friend-take the horses back to London, and I will see you again soon. Oh, and by the way, Toli is a specially trained horse, sent specifically as present to your brother, Harold. The horse is sporting a tiny black spot on his white forehead.' Cecil said revealingly. Leofwine looked relieved; the sickening tension easing his posture as they strolled back to the others awaiting further orders.

Cecil gathered his entourage around him and spoke in a aloud tone.

'Gentlemen, general military manoeuvres have been brought into effect throughout kingdom. That means the ports and coastal areas cleared of anyone not born here. I am sorry to inform you that we must return on the morning tide. This is deeply disappointing, I know. You were all looking forward to perhaps meeting those exclusive men at King Edward's court. However, there will be another time when we will all be welcomed here again.' Cecil turned to face Leofwine puffed with pride, took Leofwine's arm and led him over to his men.

'I want to introduce you to three men. They are rare, indeed. When the time

comes, these men will be a most valuable asset to both you and England.' Cecil ushered the earl forward, placing a hand upon the Robert's shoulder. 'Robert-of-Bec has skills that even the great Hardrada would be proud to possess. Along with being one of the most trustworthy souls you'd ever come across, he's passing fair company too.' Robert dropped his head respectfully. Cecil continued on to Philippe and spoke in perfect Latin. 'Tell Earl Leofwine where you were born, Philippe, in Latin, of course.' Philippe too spoke respectfully what was required of him, acknowledging Leofwine's impressed expression. 'We come next to Alan, a man who likes his ale.' Cecil's remark caused Alan to flush, holding a sheepish expression. 'Alan speaks English, Latin, and Greek, too. He is the elder brother of Philippe. All three have exceptional talents that you would find useful at court,' he said, puffed with pride.

Leofwine seemed overtly impressed with the introduction.

'I must say, Cecil, you know how to choose your men.'

'All our men garrisoned in Normandy speak English and Latin fluently.'

'It is now the policy that all men in Normandy are to be educated to the highest standards. Duke William has ordered it so,' he said stating his lie boldly, his confident expression designed to engender belief in the falsehood.

'Well, I'm very impressed with such high standards, Cecil. I'm sure my brother, Harold, and Queen Edith will be glad to hear such news.'

'Ah, yes, Queen Edith. How is your dear sister? I trust she is in good health. She is a fine, regal, woman indeed, and very astute, too. I was hoping to meet her again while we were here. Alas, such is the way of politics.' Cecil shook his head sorrowfully.

'Would you pass on my personal greetings to your gracious queen? Tell her that she has a special place in my heart. You must give Earl Harold my devoted love and respect too. I wish him well in all his endeavours. Tell him that we in Normandy are all thinking of him, that he is constantly in Duke William's thoughts, and his oaths to the duke and God are fully considered.'

Leofwine nodded. 'What messages have you for Edward?' Leofwine asked.

Cecil withdrew from under his habit a parchment. 'I was to give this communication personally to King Edward. It contains a private greeting from my lord, Duke William. I was to take the king's words of reply back with me.' Cecil replied, as he passed the letter to Leofwine, who took the parchment displaying the duke's seal.

'I'll see to it myself this is delivered safely into the hands of the king. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall escort these fine animals to London.' He said in the most respectful tone and kissed Cecil's cheek. They embraced and then parted. Then Cecil watched as the earl and his men slowly made their way northward along the old Roman road to London. Cecil shook his head disappointed.

'We had better find someone willing to take us to Earl Harold's lodgings.' Cecil stated ruefully, continuing to look in Leofwine's direction. He wondered if, perhaps, he'd been too obvious with his remark about Earl Harold's sacred oaths made to Duke William while holding the relics of holy saints.

The men went into the town looking for a means of transport up the steep gradient to their temporary lodgings above the Dover cliffs, but Cecil found no

Saxon willing to give any form of assistance.

Philippe pondered the reasons why. He could not understand the townspeople were so unwillingness to help them. He turned to Cecil and said, 'Everywhere we've inquired, we've been snubbed-why?' he asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

'It goes back a long way, Philippe. Fourteen years ago, Eustace-of-Boulogne paid a visit here with a huge retinue, and demanded lodgings for his entourage. The arrogant buffoon kicked the townspeople out of their homes to house his own people. The burghers of the town took a dislike to Eustace's disdainful attitude towards them. It was not a healthy situation, Philippe, caught between two rival factions. His contumacious behaviour led to major bloodshed. Many people died on both sides. The king, brought up in Normandy, sees himself as more Norman than English, sided with Eustace. The king ordered Earl Godwin, who was Earl Harold's father, to punish the town's people for being disrespectful to his guests. Godwin refused to punish his own loyal people. The citizens of Dover loved the earl dearly. His refusal led, ultimately, to the earl's exile. The incident left a bitter taste in the mouths of the townsfolk,' Cecil explained with a sigh.

Resigned to walking, they trudged up the steepest hill they'd ever encountered, until they came to the lodgings of the great and all-powerful Earl Harold.

Philippe, Alan, and Robert idly conversed among themselves as they waited by the tall iron entrance gate, while Cecil negotiated his way into Harold's summer retreat. Turning back for a moment, Cecil spoke in the general direction of his entourage.

'I shall presently organize your victuals and quarters,' he said, his voice haughty. The monk and then entered the inner sanctum, the doors closing behind him.

'Um?, it appears that we might have a decent night's resting quarters, boys.'

Philippe said looking about He nodded toward the impressive lodgings, before glancing at Robert to find him staring back curiously.

'Go on, Robert, what is it? Spit it out. I've noticed you've wanted to satisfy a burning curiosity since we arrived at the barracks.' he said seating himself comfortably on a log peering directly into Robert's eyes. He folded his arms, his face curious as to Robert's questioning demeanour.

Robert sat opposite him, leaned forward and spoke softly.

'Philippe. What's truly going on, here? Your arrival at the barracks and your instant employment has been puzzling me. If you're part of a secret plan, you can be sure it will go no further. I'm nothing, if not discreet,' he said, drawing nearer to Philippe, eager to learn what he perceived to be a forthcoming revelation.

His eyes lit up mischievously, but he lowered his lids before his friend could notice. Gesturing Robert closer, he said, 'Robert, I might as well tell you. This will come to you as a shock.' Philippe glanced around furtively before returning a sincere gaze. His pause gave him a moment to gather his thoughts, his mind racing to concoct his tall tale. 'I've come from a land far away known as Fooluland. The Saxon king summoned me to come. For my own safety, I am

wearing the disguise of a peasant, searching for work. Alan is my servant; he takes care of all my business. My security is paramount, and my true identity must not be revealed until the appropriate time.'

His expressionless face confirmed Robert's suspicion that his friend was someone special. He pulled back, stunned, his colour draining almost white. For a brief moment, silence reigned. Robert knelt and shuddered, his hands clasped together, tightly. God! he thought; I'm in the presence of a real live prince! He is the next king of England! He knew there was something different about Philippe. What do I do? He wondered. He was the only one who knew. No wonder Eumer and Snap have come along with us; they're to protect him on the journey. So much secrecy and I misread everything I heard or saw, he thought. Robert bowed his head obsequiously so as not to offend Philippe with a direct gaze.

'Sire, forgive me; I did not know.'

Once more, there was pregnant, almost deafening silence; and then a roar of laughter came from behind him. Robert spun about to see Alan on his knees, helpless with mirth. He swung back to see Philippe fallen off the log, wrecked with laughter. Robert's face flushed red, his embarrassment all too evident. His hands mockingly reached out for his throat. 'You bastard, Philippe Domfront! I'll wring your filthy neck.'

The mock wrestling ensued until the sound of snarling a few paces away brought to their attention, Snap, fending off a vicious dog that had taken a dislike to him. Robert cheered as the dog attacked Snap's leg.

Robert could not help himself as he called out. 'Eat the bastard! Bite his head off; there's a good boy.'

Philippe saw an old man hobble towards them, obviously looking about to see why his dog was barking, snarling and on the attack. The man grinned broadly at the sight of his dog taking a Norman lunch.

'Bite the Norman bastard, Shagger! Bite his fucking Norman balls off!' the old man growled as he strode past Snap, chuckling as the animal continued to tear into the sergeant.

'I suppose you men need a place to sleep.' the old man said uncaring.

'That's about the size of it,' Alan replied.

'Are you a Kentish man?' asked the old man, somewhat confused at Alan's accent.

'No, I'm French. The pig over there, he's the Norman,' Alan continued, nodding in Snap's direction.

'The dog has nice teeth. You have him well trained, too.'

'Well, I hope that Norman bastard doesn't poison my dog with his leg, eh,' the old man replied, still chuckling at the site of Snap trying to fend off the vicious hound.'

'Shagger's took his knife from him, already. I trained him to do that neat trick.' Turning about, he pointed to the barn. 'You can sleep in the barn, over there.' the old man said. 'The barn is full of fresh hay, and you're welcome to settle yourselves down. If there is another Norman in your group, then you'd best tell him that he'd better not go near the dog. Shagger doesn't like arrogant Normans; he's not eaten a live one in nearly a year. By the way, I

thought you should know that your priest friend has made my master's chambers comfortable for himself. When Earl Harold next comes down and hears what I have to tell him, he's not going to be too pleased with that priest. My master don't look too keen on folk forcing themselves into his private bed, see.' The old man turned and walked away, still chuckling loudly at his dog's growls.

The men made themselves comfortable in the hay, when a few minutes later Snap came hobbling into the barn, looking the worse for wear.

Rubbing bruised legs and clutching his bleeding wrist, sought solitude some distance from the other three men.

'There's never any fucking food when you need it. Bastard Saxons!' he exclaimed as he shuffled past a grinning retinue.

'I see the dog's eaten.' Robert said with a smirk.

'Shut your fucking mouth!' Snap replied as he fell into the hay.

Alan settled himself down with his hands behind his head and heaved a heavy sigh.

'You, know, I sure was worried that we would all disappear off the edge of the world. It's good to be on dry land again.' he said feeling for the hard earth. Robert swivelled round to look over at him, but didn't understand what he was talking about.

'Edge? What edge is that, Alan?' He scratched the back of his head, looking confused.

Alan glanced in Robert's direction, leaned over to begin his education.

'Surely, you must know. The edge, where the sea meets the sky, of course. I was afraid that if we went too close we might fall off and end up in hell or something. I was very apprehensive I can tell you.' he stated emphatically. 'It was a close call.'

In a flash, Robert seized the moment to explain the secrets of the deep, enlightening him as to the fate that awaited the unwary who ventured too near the edge where the sea meets the sky.

'Yes, it's true.' Robert nodded sagely, ever eager to get his own back. Alan had taken him earlier as a total fool and this was his opportunity on a plate.

'There is a story that when men fall off the edge they swim like salmon trying to get back up the falling water. Some, they tell me, are still trying. I once met an old man who had actually made it back home. He'd been swimming uphill for forty years!' He leaned over, closer to Alan's astonished face. 'Well, Apparently, he's the only known survivor, and they say, his legs had turned into something akin to that of a fish's tail. I'm guessing that he was the lucky one. As for the rest, well, who knows? Women with golden skin and tails like fish, called mermaids, eventually saved him. He told me that he survived because they allowed him to feed from their huge milk-laden breasts. Anyway, he became homesick, so they allowed him to come home to dry land. His legs eventually grew back, and he made himself a home on the shore.'

Philippe turned away desperately trying to hide his amusement. He saw his gullible brother was totally enthralled at this tale of a fantastic escape from the abyss.

'That's amazing! Is the old man still alive, Robert?' he interrupted, his

wide eyes staring directly into Robert's dark pools.

'No one really knows. Apparently, the mermaids wanted him to come back to them so they could breed from him. The story goes that they returned one night to his cottage on the seashore. They began dragging the reluctant sailor away, pulling at his legs, just as I'm pulling yours.'

For a moment, Alan stared in amazement at this tale of a seaman so close to paradise, yet so stupid as to refuse the charms of those wonderful females who would make him ecstatically happy forever. When suddenly, and with a blinding flash, he realized he was the fool. Alan's finger stabbed in Robert's direction. He spawned a sheepish smile, his cheeks flushed bright pink, unable to hide his embarrassment and disappointment. 'I'll have you back one of these days, Robert-of-Bec, just see if I don't.'

The morning light brought a cold breeze to the four men who had settled warm and snug into the old hay-filled barn. Two servants entered, bringing stale bread, hard cheese and a large flagon filled with ale. Snap appeared from his seclusion to selfishly take whatever he could eat, pushing aside the servants to grab at the food. The others stood back and allowed the pig his fill before at last they began to eat. The men sat chatting until Cecil's face appeared through the open door.

'I tried to get you quarters befitting your diplomatic status, but the Saxons were not having any of it. I was nearly relegated to the barn with you boys, despite my rank.' Cecil apologized, his pseudo-altruism radiating toward Philippe like a beacon in the murky night.

Philippe glanced up. You lying toad, he thought, as he chewed his way through the stale bread provided. He began to understand the meaning of the word diplomacy. He glanced in Cecil's direction, at a man who was a disgrace to his faith. Never before had he felt so disappointed in a man. He's lied to us, and what's more, he's a selfish bastard, too, he thought. I'll bet he told the servants that we men should have old bread. No one serves food such as that. Why? He wants us to hate the Saxons. Why would he want us to feel bitter? He wondered what Robert thought. He'll know what's going on. He's really astute. There's much more about this monk I need to learn. I want to know what's going on with this bastard. Moreover, I've not even had a decent drink since we landed. His pondering came to a halt, when Cecil spoke.

Cecil surveyed the barn, as a lord controlling the destiny of those who were his playthings.

'Well, if you gentlemen are ready, we shall make a move toward the ship.'

Philippe stood tall. His hands placed firmly upon his hips.

'Just one moment, Cecil. I think we ought to talk.'

Alan watched in shock as his brother approached the monk, almost menacingly.

For a moment, Cecil looked startled as Philippe took him by the arm, turned him around to face the barn door, then led Cecil briskly out into the bright sunshine.

'What do you think you're doing, Philippe?' he asked.

Philippe raised his hand and pointed to the now-restrained dog. For what

seemed an age he said nothing. He just gazed at the animal with his hand still raised toward it.

'Do you see that dog over there?' he said pausing for effect. 'Last night, that beast was in the process of trying to eat Sergeant Snap, not that it would have been much of a loss to us.' His grip on the monk's arm tightened a little more. 'Cecil, you have one or two things to explain to me. First of all, why that dog was let loose? Next, we were offered stale bread and hard cheese this morning! What is more, we were given no meat. Last night you cleared off to sleep in Earl Harold's bed; a rest I'm sure you found most delightful. Harold's personal servant was not amused, either.' Philippe eyes narrowed and he glared at obese monk, and continued his admonition. 'This is a process of conditioning us to pay scant regard for the Saxons, to breed a dislike for them. I'm not as imbecilic or as easily led by my nose as you apparently think. This talk you had with Earl Leofwine on the quay. What was all that about?' He noted Cecil's fury with him as the monk yanked his arm from his grasp.

'You have no idea why we were not allowed to proceed to London, Philippe; no idea whatsoever. The king had ordered manoeuvres, you know that. Besides, you are here only to do as the duke, your master, orders.' The monk said his arms now folded.

'Don't you dare take me for a fool.' Philippe replied through gritted teeth. I'm a thinking man. What's more, I know why Eumer is here, and why he was allowed to sneak off from us. He is to assassinate a high-ranking official. I doubt it is King Edward. The feeling that I have is that Eumer's victim is to be Earl Harold. I don't want to be lied to, Cecil. If my brother and I would die here or anywhere else come to that. It should be for a just cause. I'll play your game, as long as I know what it is. Is that fully understood?' Philippe stated earnestly.

Cecil nodded, 'You understand politics and then, Philippe. And then you must know how the game is played, that we're all pawns, pieces of wood to be moved across a map. You gain a little, you lose a little. It's as simple as that. You worked close to King Philippe and you did as you were told.'

'Yes, I did. I gained a position as one of the king's personal bodyguards. I listened and learned a great deal under the tutelage of various monks and scribes . . . '

Cecil's hand rose to touch his arm and gazed up into the eyes of a man the Saxons would call a housecarl. 'I will make this promise to you, Philippe. I will never lie to you, because you deserve more than that. You must understand that we have a job to do, no matter our personal feelings. Yes, I did do those things you said, and for those very reasons. As for Eumer, I can only guess.' he said with a tone of honesty.

Philippe understood Cecil's fear that there might be war with the Saxons, and listened to his explanation. Cecil too had a family, and he was not keen to have them slaughtered in a fight he knew the Saxons would win. Philippe believed that the duke's right to the throne, if the story of the succession were true, just. At least from the way Cecil had relayed it to him, but there was more to learn.

The tension relaxed and the two men strolled on, chatting. Philippe relaxed

and apologized for his outburst. Cecil, in reply, reciprocated Philippe's posture and the two shook hands.

Alan, Robert, and Snap stood at the barn door, watching as the monk and Philippe strolled slowly on the grass, discussing what might become of England. Their direction went across Earl Harold's recently scythed sweet smelling garden and stood watching the gardeners gather in the hay and place it in small piles to dry in the last of summer's heat, as dogs lay watching their work.

Cecil folded his arms and took a deep breath.

'Philippe, I understand that you learned much from your priest brother, Thomas. Tell me about him.'

Philippe sensed Cecil was about to strike a sore nerve and held up his hand, slowly shaking his head. His mind receded amongst the fog of a million thoughts.

Cecil understood. 'We ought to return to the ship, Philippe, but first I shall buy us all a fine meal before we depart.' Philippe smiled in appreciation as they headed in the direction of the barn to gather the men for the walk down the steep hill into the town of Dover.

Cecil led the entourage into one of the eating establishments frequented by fishermen and searched for a table that was unoccupied.

'We have to wait until past noon before the tide allows our vessel to sail back to Normandy, so there's plenty of time to partake of a good meal,' Cecil stated as they all seated themselves around the table.

A few moments later, the innkeeper approached the table.

'Well, gentlemen, what can I do to serve you?' he asked looking at Cecil.

'Could we have fish with vegetables and some beef with bread, and plenty of ale?' he replied with a smile, sensing the Saxon was not overly happy to have them there.

Snap sat sneering as he gazed about the room at the local Saxons chatting amongst themselves.

'So, this is the place where Eustace kicked the shit out of the Saxons, eh. They all look like a bunch of cowardly arseholes, if you ask me.' he scoffed, his heavily accented broken English echoing around the dim, musty room.

'Snap, shut up!' Cecil muttered fiercely under his breath. 'We're here to eat, not to upset the local populace with your stupidity.'

Robert and Philippe stared fixedly at Snap in a manner that suggested that he ought to curb his tongue, but Snap would have his way.

'These Saxons will soon be under the yoke of us Norman rulers. And then they'll see who are the masters around here.'

'Did I hear you say Eustace and Normandy?' a voice from the semi-darkness called out.

'Yeah, I did.' Snap replied sarcastically. 'Do you have a problem with that?'

From the gloom, a bench flew at the contumacious Snap, hitting him squarely on his back. Snap toppled to the ground. In a thrice he sprang to his feet to meet the challenge, returning the bench with gusto. He followed his throw with a dive at the first man he saw standing. In seconds, the room was in uproar as Saxon men pounced upon the visitors with fists flying and anything else that

came to hand. Alan ducked a punch and dove into the fray with Philippe and Robert, beating off as many as they could, while Cecil hid himself away under the table.

A few minutes later, injured men lay strewn on the floor, groaning. Snap nursing a broken arm growled in pain. The brothers each sported bruised eyes and cut lips, and Robert, sucking on a bleeding knuckle, escorted Snap outside, followed closely by Cecil on his hands and knees.

'It's too bad the Saxons have a problem with foreigners, or is it just Snap?'

Philippe groused, unable to resist popping Snap on the back of the head.

'Unfortunately, I've a feeling that we'll be back.' he said as he looked back at the plethora of bruised and bloodied Saxons now pulling themselves up from the floor.

'It would be a good idea to make for the ship. The sooner we embark, the better.' Cecil muttered, smacking Snap's arm, smiling with grim pleasure at the resultant groan. 'We've lost our dinner because of it.'

CHAPTER SIX

Queen Edith's private quarters were comfortable, warm and spacious. Within the queen's accommodations, oils and aromatic herbs, set in small baskets here and there gave a fresh vibrant aroma to the atmosphere. In her bathing room, the only sound was the swishing and sloshing of water as a hand gently bathed the queen in her sunken marble bath. Now and then, one of her servants, on a summons from her hand, stepped forward to administer to her needs.

She trusted no one with her private thoughts, except Monica, her lady in waiting who had been her childhood friend and companion, they were inseparable.

These were dangerous times. No one was to be trusted, least of all the servants closest to her. The who women attended to her needs were there to dress their queen, nothing more; more like a queen bee in a hive, yes she was unable to her duty, and this haunted her. The workers did theirs: except, of course, Queen Edith did not produce an offspring.

Her maidservants were young, not one older than nineteen years. The girls were daughters of thegns, noblemen with land. Gaining positions with the royal household gave their fathers a sense of power. She knew her ladies well enough; young girls were talkative in the company of men. Cautioned by her brothers, Harold, Swein and Gyrth, they had schooled Edith these last few months on the subject of loose lips. She knew that even her closest friends could inadvertently betray her. Edith was bright, very bright. She constantly reminded herself that she was a Godwinson, first-and-foremost, from the most-powerful family in England.

She stepped out of the hot bathwater to be dried and gently massaged. Her maidservants applied rose oil to her supple, pink, and youthful skin. It brought

to her the softness and aroma she so loved. Donning her gown, her fingers ran down the silken undergarment; the feel excited her as it hung loosely and was comfortable, giving her ample bosom freedom of movement. Servants held dresses for her perusal and she indicated her choice for the evening. She chose a loose, yellow silk gown. She favoured this dress. The attire was comfortable, and she particularly admired the square Grecian pattern around the edges sewn in gold and silver thread.

Edith was tall and slim, with not a hint of fat on her beautiful body. Her long golden hair fell to her waist and her maidservants washed and made it into plaits after arduous drying; it rolled to form three twirls. Two plaits were pinned to the side of her head, covering her ears; the remainder set above the nape of her neck; a blue silk wimple covered her head and neck, to fall, loosely down her back and was pinned with a brass brooch.

Her toilet complete, Edith slipped her feet into soft lambskin slippers then motioned to Cynwise, the eldest of her maidservants, to bring her Bible. Edith sat in her comfortable but plainly carved high-backed oak armchair; its embroidered cushions, heavy and thickly filled with duck-down, depicted heavenly scenes of angels. When she sat on them, the cushions matched exactly the contours of her body. Her servants stood silently around her, patiently in line, waiting any requests from their queen.

'You will leave me now.' she said softly. She watched as the women bowed, then moved to quietly exit from the room to leave her alone to her thoughts.

She sat quite alone, looking about the room. She gazed at a tapestry she had commissioned, draped upon the wall. The embroidered figures of her brothers depicted within in various hunting scenes. The detailed wool and silk work looked so life-like, even to Edith's critical eye; she was pleased with the finesse of the elegant workmanship.

She wished she felt ready to embrace the solitude she required to help compose her, but she fidgeted nervously, wondering how she would deal with the stupendous events unfolding before her. The queen was rarely nervous, but this night was quite different. Her informants kept her abreast of events both at home and abroad. News from Normandy was cryptic, so only she would understand should harm befall her agents. The news was not good, and she feared for her brothers, especially Harold.

On her lap, the weight of the magnificently illuminated Bible pressed down upon her knees. It was a present from her husband, King Edward, given two years ago to celebrate her thirty-fifth birthday. A log on the fire hissed and crackled. She turned to stare into the flames, the flickering light of dancers, darting aimlessly hither and thither. The stone fireplace, prominent on the long wall of this oblong chamber, held its own show of dancing figures, as if in contest with the minuscule athletes from the candelabra. The spitting and hissing of the burning logs were contemptuous of the opposing tallow's pathetic attempts to light the room for their mistress. Her thoughts drifted here and there as the pictures in her mind wandered back and forth to bring images of her life with King Edward and of her incarceration at the nunnery, in exile. They were not happy times.

Both hands pulled the mighty book to her hips. It was as if she were afraid that if she let go of it her faith in God would leave her. She gazed down, staring at the book's leather covering embossed with gold with angels entwined with scrolling, with knotted ropes that ended in two heads of serpents. Prominently in the centre, in gold leaf, there was a cross with the depiction of Jesus bearing the pain for the sins of all humanity. The book had an iron clasp and hinge with which to secure and lock the precious words from preying mouths of insects. Her grip on the book loosened as she carefully opened the heavy cover to reveal the first page. It was beautifully illuminated, each page embossed with gold and lapis lazuli. The angelic figures, holding the large capitals in the margins, stood out of the page, inviting her fingers to roam lightly across the wonderful scroll-work of an unknown scribe.

In the beginning, she remembered, life was good. Her eyes gazed up towards the flickering yellow flame of a candle no more than an arm's length away. The rising smoke from its flame seemed to twist and curl, and spread out evenly, to creep along the ceiling in search of a space to rest. The years of pain and torment she had endured from her husband tortured her. She recalled how her father forced her to marry the king in a political manoeuvre all those years before. It would all soon be at an end. As the hours passed, her mind rested and she slept a while.

She woke, rejuvenated. Her thoughts gathered, she sat comfortably, carefully knitting each scene to construct a solution to the kingdom's problems. Now, she felt prepared for the arduous climax of the events ahead. She was, nevertheless, afraid; many factors could easily disrupt her planning and change the course she had set for this scéptred guardian of its people.

Outside the queen's bedchamber, Childric, the queen's messenger sat on a small stool in the candle-lit corridor. He waited patiently for his mistress to call for whatever her desire of him might be. Childric heard the steps of someone approaching, slowly; the tapping of a stick, the laboured breathing and the shuffling of poorly lifted feet told him it was someone he knew well. As the figure came into view, he saw the rounded personage of Stigand, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Childric rose to his feet to greet him. He stood to attention and dropped his head reverently as he waited for Stigand to speak.

'You're Grace.' he said, lowering his head in respectful salutation.

'Is the queen at home to me, boy?' Stigand asked breathlessly. Childric nodded then turned to face the portal and tapped lightly on the door five times. Earl Harold had instructed the boy of the code for various personages, so that the code and call matched, to inform the queen of any threat that might harbour outside; assassins lurked abroad, Harold had told her, firmly. The knock was unexpected. For a moment, Edith was startled. Her concentration lost as she heard Childric calling.

'You have a visitor, My Lady. It is His Grace, The Archbishop Stigand, requesting an audience with the queen.' the he called, his alto voice easily penetrating the oak portal. Stigand gazed directly at Childric, looking to see if the smile on the boy's face was indeed a smile or a smirk. Stigand shrugged, smiled back at the boy and returned to gaze blankly at the door.

Raising herself from her chair and moving gracefully across the room, the queen placed the heavy Bible on the beautifully bee polished chestnut table. She stood looking at the door, waiting, her right hand resting upon the holy book.

'Let the Archbishop enter.' she replied. Her voice had a gravel-like roughness about it, her stress evident as she realized the hour was near when she would become a dowager; a queen in name only, without power, with little force to command. She stood perfectly still, her eyes closed, as if in prayer.

The boy opened the door, bowing. Childric watched the Archbishop enter the room slowly, his long robes sweeping the floor. Childric closed the door behind him then ran towards the exit to the courtyard. Once outside, he burst into uncontrollable laughter, until he was able to thoroughly compose himself; Stigand was a buffoon, a clown in robes.

She held out her left hand. Stigand bowed awkwardly and painfully, he lightly kissed her hand. He returned upright, his soreness clearly apparent upon his red, pockmarked face. Edith was aware of his arthritis and gout. His painful condition brought on by an epicurean lifestyle, torturing his now obese physical attributes. The queen pointed toward his miter, trying hard to suppress a laugh, which she managed to reduce to a broad smile. How funny, she thought, this small man looks absurd in such a silly hat.

'Take off that sappy headgear, Stigand, you look ridiculous.' she said nonchalantly, as she turned to look away, her smile, now a smirk hidden from his view. He removed his heavy miter with its long, gold threaded tails, placing it on the table next to her Bible.

'Do sit, Stigand.' she said, motioning him to a comfortable chair near the fireside. She looked on sympathetically as the old man moved toward the chair, managing to seat himself without showing too much distress. She knew his painful afflictions taunted him, but was always sympathetic to his needs and comfort. For the moment she elected to stand.

'What news do you bring of Harold? Has he not yet returned?' she inquired, looking down at him. She could see from his expression that Harold had not been located. Edith read faces and demeanour very well. It was an art she had learned and practised through the many years of observing court intrigue. Edith was an astute woman; no one lied to her. It was well known she could detect and see through any falsehoods.

He sat uncomfortably, his gout-ridden toes refusing to give him any relief from his suffering. He gazed up at her, wondering how she might feel.

'No, my Lady, not yet. I have asked that Brithnoth send out a party to search for him. It is Harold's way to be alone; he clears his mind that way, thus he can thus focus his thoughts on the problems ahead. If you recall, ma'am, your father used to ride out alone, and for the same reason.' he said apologetically.

She smiled, relieved he knew her brother's habits well enough. Her expression and demeanour changed to one of solemnity.

'The time of my husband's death is at hand. I am afraid for this country's future,' she said, uncharacteristically wringing her hands nervously.

He gazed at her, trying to read her expressions.

'The future, Ma'am— do you mean the succession? Though Harold and I are

friends, I am not yet privy to his thoughts on all matters pertaining to the succession. There is confusion amongst the witan about what will come next, as is the man tilling the fields. When the king departs on his journey to the bosom of our Lady Mary, it will be Harold we must surely look to.' Stigand coughed, clearing his throat and continued on 'The current situation of the king having no legitimate heir complicates the succession, as you're completely aware. I wish, therefore, to speak with Harold on the matter immediately upon his return. Before I do that, I need to speak with you first on an issue that may allay the many fears of the witan on this delicate problem.' Stigand swallowed deeply, not knowing how the queen would react to his forthcoming suggestion. 'As you know, the witan are gathering here in a full Gemot. They have the right to choose and ratify who is to be their new monarch.' Stigand hesitated, he knew he was close to overstepping the mark.

Edith stood looking down upon him, her arms now crossed. Stigand irritated her at times, with his incessant meddling, despite his high office.

'Go on, Stigand, you may speak your mind.' She sensed he was going to put his foot in his mouth, and not for the first time in his career.

'I-I've come to ask if you would consider becoming sole ruler, queen in your own right, with full regal powers-if the witan approve, of course.' Blurting out the words almost unthinkingly, he realized he had asked the wrong question at the wrong time.

'What! A dog's pizzle I will!' The queen blurted exasperatedly. Edith stood upright, her shoulders back. 'Oh no, Stigand!' she replied indignantly. 'If you think I am to become sole ruler of England, you can put aside such ideas. Are you out of your mind? I would need to take a husband and produce a legitimate heir. I'm no longer of childbearing age, nor am I a brood mare to be used as a whore for England's pleasure! In any case, you have forgotten the Ætheling.'

Stigand's mouth dropped. He began to stutter as his words refused to cohere. His nerves overtook his sensibilities as both sides of his brain fought for dominance in an effort to take back his foolish thought.

Edith stepped over to the table and placed her hands upon the Bible. She bent down and lightly kissed the book's ornate cover, then returning upright, she crossed herself. She turned about and stepped the few paces back toward the pathetic-looking Stigand. Once more, she gazed down at him with the softness of a mother upon a child and saw his embarrassment.

'You ought to have discussed your ideas with my brother, Harold.'

'Time is so short,' he mumbled.

'You are a good man, Stigand. However, forced into doing something against my wishes is an anathema? Harold will show the way. He is the light; the only hope we have of stability. I have spoken with Edward on the matter some days ago and he agreed that all promises he might have made to others in the past are now void. My husband is to pass his kingdom on to Harold. Harold does not yet know of this decision. He may wish not to take on the responsibility; it's a heavy burden.'

'My Lady, would the witan accept Harold as their rightful and legitimate king?'

She gazed deeply into Stigand's azure blue eyes. Her face became severe, yet controlled.

'You must understand, Stigand, that I know that you are counselling the members of the witan as they arrive, and in favour of Harold, too.' she said, noticing Stigand's look of surprise. 'Don't be alarmed, I understand your motives aren't malicious. You are looking for a way to avoid warfare and to keep your position.' She patted the back of his hands, as a mother to a child. She turned to stroll over to look out of the window into the blackness. For a moment her thoughts drifted to her late father, Godwin, then retraced her steps. 'When Edith Swanneck arrives, show her to me. I need to speak urgently with her. Now I must go to my husband.' She turned toward the door.

'Page!' she called. The door opened and she made her exit, smiling at Childric as she passed him, making her way towards the King Edward's bedchamber.

Stigand struggled to his feet, retrieved his mitre, then slowly, laboriously, followed the queen out of the door.

In the corridor he met Brithnoth, Earl Harold's right-hand man. Stigand glanced up into the face of the seven foot tall giant. Against the tall man's background, Stigand expressed a sad and confused demeanour. For a moment the two men stood staring at each other. Stigand knew Brithnoth never could stand the sight of him. But for peace, they showed an overt due respect to each other; their private thoughts always kept to themselves. Stigand was well aware that Brithnoth would prefer a fighting bishop, not unlike Odo of Bayeux.

Together, they made their way to see King Edward. On reaching the king's bedchamber, Stigand's nose wrinkled with the offensive odour of dried sweat emanating from the giant. Brithnoth had bathed, he could see that much, but noticed that he was, as usual, wearing his filthy, smelly, quilted jerkin ribbed vertically. Each rib was almost as thick as a man's arm he never had washed. On top of this, he wore a full mail shirt that dropped to just above his knees. Stigand sighed. He has once more donned that filthy, unwashed, flea-ridden jerkin, he thought. Nonetheless, he had an admiration for a man who stood taller than all other men, and not just for his height. He is respected by all his men. In return, he respected his men. Brithnoth was always supremely confident.

Stigand knew that nothing bothered the man who had fought and beaten some of the bravest men on the known earth.

'What's the situation with the king, Brithnoth?' he asked noticing the giant's broad smile. Brithnoth nodded in the direction of the king's bedchamber.

'The king's ladies are running about like chickens without heads, Stigand. No one seems to know what is going on. Though when the queen enters the bedchamber, she'll secure some sort of order; she's good at that sort of thing.'

'And Harold?' replied Stigand, looking perplexed.

'As you asked earlier, I'm to have Osfrid search for Harold now. I will tell the lad to bring him back here at once. I hope that when the boy finds him, Harold comes immediately. Though God-alone-knows where he is. I can see my having to send out boys looking everywhere. You know, Harold really is a pain, sometimes. He just goes off, and leaves not a word with anyone as to his whereabouts. But that's Harold for you.'

Stigand's nose wrinkled to the smell of another obnoxious odour emanating from the king's bedchamber some way down the corridor.

'You get used to the stench after a while, Stigand. I suggest you pick up some herbs on your way.' Brithnoth said, whose own stench-ridden clothes neutralized any odour.

Brithnoth left Stigand to make his way briskly towards the exit and out to the courtyard. At the door, he looked out into the blackness, his eyes adjusting to the night.

'Osfrid!' The guttural call of the head of the king's housecarls was so loud, that some said folk heard his call in France, Normandy, and beyond. He stood looking through the damp, mist-laden night, patiently waiting for the young man to appear. He peered into the darkness toward the stables fifty or so paces away where lantern enclosed candles dimly illuminated the scene within. As he waited, he took from his sheath a dagger and began sharpening it with a fine-grained stone he kept in a small utility pouch on his leather belt. Hearing the call of an owl, he called back, his reply returned by this beautiful feathered creature. He smiled broadly. This old dog still has the knack, he thought. Now, let me see. One-two-three... He paused counting at thirteen. No doubt he's screwing my daughter. I'll give him to a count of seventy-five, and then I will give him one hell of a headache. He mused, then resumed his count... Fourteen-fifteen-sixteen...

Upon hearing the call, Osfrid, a strong, muscular, handsome youth of some eighteen years, took to his feet. 'I gotta go, sweet lips. Your father is going to kill me if I'm not beside him instantly.'

'You'd better go before he cuts off my favourite part of you.' she said without looking up.

Osfrid left the girl on her hands and knees, and, rushing past Fredrick, the stable boy at lightning speed entered the courtyard, running as fast as his legs could carry him. He was soon standing before his mentor, the great warrior, Brithnoth, the strongest, and the best fighting man in England. Brithnoth was his guru, a man who, in the eyes of all under him, God-like.

'Ah, Osfrid. So, you're not dead then!' He faked his sternest look, a gaze to put the fear of God into men; even stone statues, it was said, stood to attention at his command; and the devil, too, so it was said, hid from his fearsome sight.

Breathing heavily, the youth stooped to place his hands upon his knees, his face flushed.

'You called me Sire?' The boy replied. His chest heaved deeply for more air. He gulped. His heart pounded as the thought of severe admonition from the giant man gripped him. His stomach churning, the adrenaline flowing through his veins heightened his sense of being. He stood upright and took in yet more air. His exhaled breath drifted into the night through the candlelit doorway. The young man readied himself for a punch. He wondered if he had been quick enough. Brithnoth was a man known for his harshness toward men whose work was less than expected. They would never become housecarls. Not allowed to hit back or fall, the boy's muscles tightened and strained- yet he was less ready for what was to

come next.

Brithnoth turned away, looking for the owl that once more hooted his territorial call into the night. The giant hooted back a long call, again to have the call returned by the beautiful bird of prey.

'He wouldn't call back if my call had not sounded genuine. I'm surprised he didn't swoop down to see me off his feeding ground. My father, Guthrin, taught me so much when I was but as tall as a blade of grass.' Brithnoth crossed himself then mumbled inaudibly, one sentence in prayer for the man he respected and loved so much and who had died so many years before.

There was something less severe about his master and Osfrid sensed it, despite Brithnoth's initial stern look.

Brithnoth treated sternly, but fairly, his young trainee housecarls, and took great pride in them, yet no quarter given for slackness; and the occurrence of a punch to the face was usual. If you fell, you were out, and never should he cry.

The boys aspired to become the best warriors in the world, and Osfrid was no exception. Pain, Brithnoth told them, was likening to washing in ice-cold water; it was unpleasant, but you ignored it. In training, they learned through confidence and skill to fear nothing. They fought for their king under, he and Earl Harold, who was greatly loved and admired, and renowned for his courage and ability. Brithnoth often practised his warrior's art with Harold. The two were a match, often inflicting grievous wounds upon each other, almost as severe as in battle. Both gave no quarter to the other until exhaustion or blood in the eyes of one of the men left them all but blinded.

'I'm pleased to see you ran here, Osfrid. You have listened to your trainers to run at the double at all times. For a period of three months, you will wear this full, double-weight chain mail shirt, Osfrid. You will sleep, fuck, eat, and shit while wearing it. You will soon get used to the armour's weight. By this time next week, if you bend to take breath, I will have your head off. Is that understood?' Brithnoth looked sternly into the eyes of the young man, with a hidden pride reserved only for the very few.

'Yes, Sire- at all times, Sire.' Osfrid, was feeling somewhat relieved that the great man had not punished him. Brithnoth, too, wore double a mail shirt, taking it off only to bathe.

Osfrid was desperately trying to suppress a smile, but too late; nature allowed his relief to show. He noticed Brithnoth's wink, he almost relaxed, but stood firm. He would do anything for this man, anything.

Brithnoth bowed his head a little toward Osfrid's face. He sniffed the sweet smell of rose oil emanating from the boy. Looking over Osfrid's shoulder, he noticed bits of straw entwined between the links of his mail shirt.

'I take it I took you from more important business with my daughter, Fara?' he said, sporting a mischievous grin as wide as a barn door.

Osfrid had a glint in his eyes that Brithnoth knew did not require an answer.

He liked Osfrid, a young man with much potential and a sharp brain. With an arm outstretched, he lifted the double weighted youth by the scruff to his full height, then more, a full foot off the ground. Looking toward the stables, Brithnoth turned Osfrid about, then put the youth down.

He pointed a finger through the gloom from whence the boy had come. His impressive show of strength never failed to inspire a yearning in his trainees to be one day like their master.

'I want you to have Fredrick saddle a horse. I've an important job for you. You are to take a message to Earl Harold. I will be ready with the message as soon as you've made your steed fit for the road.'

'Yes, Sire. I know where the earl is to be found.' he replied confidently.

'You do?' Brithnoth replied relieved.

'Yes, Sire. He always goes to the same place when he needs time to think.'

'And that place is?' Brithnoth asked, staring quizzically.

'By the old Sandwich Fork Road, Sire; it's quiet there. He looks out to the river and he listens to the wind in the trees. He says it gives him inspirational thought, whatever that is.'

'Well, don't just stand there, boy; go and ready a horse.' Brithnoth shoved Osfrid lightly, but firmly, forward toward the stables, then returned inside to write his message.

Grinning broadly, Osfrid sprinted back from whence he came. Fredrick was grooming a sick mare he was nursing back to health after an attack of colic, when Osfrid came running in through the stable door. Fredrick greeted him.

'Hey, what's the rush, Osfrid?' asked the boy, looking with astonishment towards his older friend and companion. 'I expected you to come back with a frown and a black eye, especially after what you have been up to. What's going on?' he asked, placing the brush on the shelf above him. Fredrick strolled over to the stable where Toli had been taking a drink from a now empty pail. The beast lifted her head, stared at Fredrick, seeming to smile. Stroking her nose, he whispered a few words to her, then picked up the bucket and ambled back to where Osfrid stood. He nonchalantly dropped the bucket to one side, placing his hand on his hips and waited for a reply.

'Well? Brithnoth didn't call you over to share his supper, now; did he?'

'I've to take a message to Earl Harold, and you're to saddle a horse for me at once. I'm to meet Brithnoth at the courtyard door as soon as I have a horse ready, so look lively.'

'It's about the king, isn't it? He is dying. I have had to stable and look after so many thegns horses tonight. I overheard some of the thegns talking about the king being on his deathbed. It frightens me to think about it.'

'That might please Brithnoth. I don't think he ever did like the king. I overheard him once, speaking to Harold. He said the king was a pompous, butt fucking arsehole.' Osfrid gazed at him sternly. 'Well, he is an arsehole.' Fredrick replied indignantly.

Osfrid's humour returned and sported a broad grin that turned to a laugh. He composed himself with the realisation of the duty he was about to perform for his master.

'Fredrick, just get on and saddle that horse; will you. Arsehole or not, Edward is still the king, and if nothing else, you should respect his office.'

Osfrid looked on as Fredrick made his way out of the stables to the saddler's workshop where all saddles were stored and repaired. Osfrid sought out

Toli. She was Harold's second horse, beautiful, powerful, and fearless.

'Hello, old girl.' he said smiling, 'You're coming for a canter with me tonight. We're off to find your master.' Toli snorted as her head rose sharply and appeared to give a nodding approval to the venture. The youth blew warm breath into the nose of the mighty beast, and in reply, the horse snuggled her head into the shoulder of the young man she so often had upon her back. She snorted gently, her exhalation warming Osfrid's neck.

'Be good for me tonight, Toli. This is a special night. We may have a new king very soon. Who that may be, no one can tell, but my guess, old gal, is you might be seating a king on your back. How does that sound, eh?' Osfrid opened the cubicle door and led Toli out to wait for Fredrick to arrive with the saddle.

'I have a treat for you. It's a carrot for my favourite lady. I'm sure you'll like it. That nice man, Eumer, brought them over from Normandy just for you. Here, I have a little honey dip for you, too.' He dipped the purple root into the honey he held in a small glass vial. Toli seemed to like it, unlike the white carrots that grew in England, and chewed with relish the hard yet sweet taste the honey added to it.

He noticed Fredrick grimace as the boy struggled through the door with the heavy wooden and leather covered saddle that was really too cumbersome for him to carry without assistance. He offered to help Fredrick lift the saddle onto Toli's back. Fredrick did not object. He smiled his appreciation for Osfrid's help.

'You didn't need to bring such a large saddle.'

'Toli is used to a wooden saddle, Osfrid, you know that. Earl Harold has told me it is the best training a groom could have. Wrestling with heavy equipment builds up the muscles. I might even be able to train like you as a housecarl one day, if I'm strong enough, that is.'

'Well, if nothing else you're keen and able. I'm sure that one of these days you will, as I have, become a trainee housecarl. It is hard work, and the men treat you unkindly sometimes. You have to be hard and learn how to cope with pain and ignore it.' Fredrick frowned. He knew from watching the housecarls in training just how tough they were. Broken bones were an everyday occurrence. It was not unusual while in practice with the two-handed battle axe to get badly hurt or even die.

'Tighten this strap a little more for me; would you, Fredrick? Osfrid stood with hands on hips, his head nodding towards the girth strap.

'You should always check your own saddle and straps, Osfrid, you know that.'

'Well, go on, finish the job, I'm not your slave.'

'There's no putting anything across you, Fredrick, is there?' Osfrid said, grinning.

'Ha! If you fall off, it's your own fault.' Fredrick replied, as he patted the patient Toli.

'I'm not going to argue with you. Toli is ready for the journey, and I'd better make a move, before I get my back-side kicked.'

Osfrid led Toli outside, running, and made his way across the courtyard. He

called out to the guard and asked of Brithnoth.

'I hear you, Osfrid,' Brithnoth called out as he rounded the corner corridor that led from the king's anti-chamber. In his hand he held a rolled parchment. 'Now, you are to take this to Earl Harold. He is to return at once. Do you understand?' He handed Osfrid the parchment that had the Queen's personal seal upon it.

'Yes, sire, at once.' Osfrid stuffed the roll into his jerkin underneath his mail shirt so as not to lose it on the journey.

'Now, be off. Don't come back without Earl Harold.' Brithnoth looked on as Osfrid mounted the horse, trotted towards the gates and rode into the night. He turned to the guard, Ragbrid, who stood rigidly to attention. 'He's a fine boy, Ragbrid, a fine boy.' Brithnoth smiled then strolled slowly back inside the palace.

In the gloom and darkness, some way out of the city of London, three men stood waiting. One of these men, Eumer, was a dark, reclusive character who rarely spoke to anyone. He was tall, strong, handsome, intelligent, clever and evil. He could plan strategically, and move about Europe taking payment from anyone with enough money looking for someone to give him the work he specialized in, the disposal of dangerous and unwanted people, not just ordinary people but powerful people: those who normally, were under heavy guard. Kings, dukes, earls. It did not matter too much, as long as the money, and enough of it, was forthcoming. Tonight was to be an exception, an easy target for him. He'd hired a couple of disaffected thugs from a local tavern where he'd been lodging.

He observed his new employees were strong enough. What was more, they were stupid enough to wait for payment after their task was completed. As a corpse could tell no tales, he would dispose of them soon after tonight's task was complete.

As he waited for Earl Harold, he watched, in the dappled moonlight, his two henchmen were making the rope between two trees taut. Moments later, their task complete, they retired to the undergrowth to hide in wait for their victim.

After he had dispatched Harold, Eumer was to return to the tavern for a few weeks while the Saxons ran around like demented chickens searching the ports on the south coast for him. Meanwhile, and until all was clear, he would utilise the serving wenches. These girls were keen for some attention, especially when they could earn a little extra for their family's needs. He always slept alone, though, never allowing himself the privilege of sharing with anyone what nocturnal words that he might utter. To mine-host, he was a passing journeyman carpenter plying his trade, earning a little here and there. He had just finished working on the newly completed Westminster Abbey, he had told the landlord. Now, he was going to enjoy the proceeds of his labours, and then would move on to pastures new, perhaps, to repair a church or bridge.

He had used his two contacts within the king's household well. These two fine, upstanding ladies, who'd been in his paymaster's pockets, had been Duke William's willing servants for many years and soon would be rewarded for their work, the Lady Saethryd and the Lady Ethelfrith. He would have to dispose of

them, too, but that would be an easy accomplishment. These two ladies had done a creditable job in supplying the information on the habits and whereabouts of Earl Harold Godwinson.

Fredrick, and his friend Osfrid, were willing to be helpful in any way they could. For a few purple carrots, they would tell you their life stories, loan you a horse too, if it came to that. It is, he thought, amazing what you can get away with as a journeyman carpenter.

In the distance, Eumer heard the thumping hooves of an approaching horse, the snapping and cracking of brittle twigs and small fallen branches, but from an unexpected direction. With an owl-like hoot, he signalled to the two thugs, who were waiting to do their deadly task, to dispatch the rider, whoever it is, quickly.

Osfrid rode on into the mist, towards where he knew Earl Harold to be. Now and then the clouds and the mist cleared to reveal a full moon that shed ample light on the path ahead. A bell in the distance sounded eleven on the hour. The clouds once more took the light from the path ahead; all was now darkness. Toli knew the way instinctively and cantered on needing no reins from Osfrid. Here and there, the dripping of water off the trees fell into his face.

As horse and rider rounded the copse near the fork in the road, Osfrid was pulled from his horse by a rope stretched across two trees. He fell to the ground, stunned. From behind the trees, three men jumped upon the now scarcely conscious rider. The tallest of the men held onto Toli's reins, while, with professional efficiency, another of the men took out a sharp blade, and, with one movement, sliced Osfrid's throat almost to the bone. Osfrid looked up in shocked horror, gurgling and gasping as consciousness left him. Eumer noticed the message and took it from his tunic, leaving the now limp, blooded and lifeless body to the thugs, who quickly dragged the cadaver behind some bushes to cover the body with brush and scrub.

The clouds cleared and the moon shed light enough to read. Eumer broke the seal and unrolled the parchment then read the letter's contents.

'This isn't the man we seek, it's his messenger. We'll have to wait a while longer.' said Eumer, cursing his bad luck. In the darkness Eumer ordered the two thugs once more to pull taut the rope between the two trees. He then motioned the thugs back to their previous hiding place, while he led Toli into the woods and tethered the horse to a tree.

Harold stared at the moon. His thoughts filled with apprehension for his future and that of his fellow Englishmen. He thought of those he knew, and of those who would see their last sun when the day of reckoning, which surely must come in war, finally arrived.

It was getting late, and he knew he ought soon to be at the palace. He strolled toward his horse tethered to a tree nearby. He mounted his steed and pulled his cloak's collar up over his neck and rode into the night following the path back to the king's palace to be with the man he knew was soon to be in paradise.

The night was cold and damp, colder than it had been for many weeks. The

clouds, smoke grey, as though hiding within their midst a host of evil, moved from the east over the south of England, fleetingly covering any light the moon may have wanted to shed upon this English land. Harold rode onward with a canter, oblivious of the trap set menacingly for him.

'What-huh!' Harold exclaimed, as the rope caught him, then he fell from his horse. An owl, startled, flew low to find elsewhere the serenity of a feeding watch. Harold's horse pulled up a few paces ahead, turned to look at his master, waiting patiently.

The fall briefly stunned him. He detected the sound of someone's sword withdrawing from its scabbard, and he scrambled to his feet, his wits heightened to his lethal situation.

Two men emerged from the darkness, running the few paces toward him. From the front and rear, both men were quickly upon him. One of the villains attempting to seize him from behind dropped his dagger, but managed to hold the winded earl in a vice-like grip, while the other approached, menacingly, toward him with a sword held above his head, dagger-like, his intention clearly to skewer Harold through, then leave him for dead.

As the blade was about to thrust and penetrate, Harold lifted his legs and pushed the man away, causing him to fall on the ground some few paces before him, the sword falling at Harold's feet. With a twist of his body, Harold was at last, able to turn the man who held him to the ground. The attacker scrambled for his grounded dagger and tried to stand. In a flash, Harold grappled the instrument from the attacker's hand, and with one action slit the man's throat.

A break in the clouds allowed the moonlight to illuminate the scene, giving him a clear look at the first attacker. He grasped the fallen sword. Then, as he swung around, he caught another glimpse of the figure returning to attack once more. In one swift, almost gracious movement, Harold threw the sword. The blade turned end over end, and then, with a thud and a cry from the searing pain of a steel blade penetrating flesh, the man fell dead.

From behind a tree, Eumer took careful aim; his crossbow steady, he loosed off the deadly bolt, its target fifty paces away. It flew with deadly accuracy toward the man whom it was to send to heaven. Just as Harold bent down to take a closer look at the attacker, he felt the rush of wind pass his ear, and, a split-second later, heard the thud of the crossbow's bolt hit a tree some distance away. He turned to look toward where he thought the bolt had emanated, but could see nothing. Moments later, he heard the sound of hooves receding at speed into the distance.

Harold's eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed and brushed himself down, cursing.

'He's bound to try again. I'll be waiting for you next time; you can be sure of that.' he muttered, clenching his fists. He took the sword and dagger, and with the tunic of one of the dead men, wiped the dagger and sword clean of the assassins' blood and placed the weapons in his belt.

With his fingers to his lips, the earl blew a whistle and moments later, his horse returned to his side. He then readied himself to stride the saddle, being careful to be sure no other assailants were about. Once more, he was upon his horse and rode on into the night, this time taking an alternative route back to

the king's palace.

A short time later, Harold entered the courtyard of the palace at Westminster. Greeted by the groom, Fredrick, the boy held on to Harold's steed as he dismounted.

'Take my horse, boy; rub him down, and make sure he's kept warm.'

'Yes, Sire. I have warm covers for him ready in the stables,' replied the boy attentively.

'You're a good lad, Fredrick. Be sure not to feed him oats; if you do, he will be sick. Hay and a few turnips is all he needs, some fresh water, too, and not too much, mind.'

'Yes, Sire. Only hay and turnips. Sire-where is Osfrid?' he asked with puzzled look. Harold stared at the boy with an intense gaze.

'Tell me, Fredrick, who is it that has taken Toli out tonight?' he asked noticing that Toli was not in his stable.

'Osfrid rode out on Toli, to meet you, Sire. My master, Brithnoth, sent him to fetch you, and I see that Osfrid is not with you.'

He patted the boy's shoulder; and without answering, strode briskly toward the palace entrance, where, in the doorway, Brithnoth stood waiting for him.

'Ah, Harold, you took your time; where have you been? I sent young Osfrid, to bring you to us. I trust he had no problem finding you,' Brithnoth inquired with a smile.

Harold looked deeply concerned. 'I had a welcoming party waiting for me, one I didn't expect and with whom I severely disagreed with. I fear Osfrid has not returned,'

'No, I understood he would accompany you, Harold.' Brithnoth noticed that Harold's clothing was in disarray, when the sad tone in Harold's words fell upon him.

'My God, man, you've been ambushed!' and his puzzlement receded, beginning to realize the grim reality that Osfrid would not be returning. He stared at the ground, his expression of guilt obvious as Harold began to relay his story.

'Then Osfrid has been mistaken for me. If this is the case, then I fear he will not be returning. I was beckoned into a trap. I nearly didn't make it back. Two of my assailants gave me a rough time of it, obviously, they were hired ruffians, but their leader was a professional assassin. This encounter has been well planned, Brithnoth. Two of them I dispatched, but the other one got away. You will find their bodies by the fork on the Sandwich Road. We must search the assassin out. It seems the fox has made the first move.'

'Assassins, Harold! You go nowhere without at least two housecarls in future. Is that clear?' Brithnoth took Harold's arm in his vice-like grip. The earnest look upon Brithnoth's face said more than words.

'I can look after myself, but good advice for all of that.' Harold's thoughts drifted to whom might have planned this attack. Brithnoth cleared his throat.

'I'll see the bodies are brought in right away; perhaps we may be able to identify them. If my hunch is correct, they are Duke William's men. It's his favoured tactic; this much I know,' Brithnoth snorted. Harold lent against the

door post, gazing into the blackness, thoughtful.

'Whoever their master is, they'll not be receiving their pay for this night. I want Osfrid found. If he is alive, that is all to the good. If he is dead, then see that he has a good burial at my expense. Is that clear, my good friend?' He ordered, brushing detritus from his tunic.

'You're perfectly clear, Harold. I fear for the boy. By our Lady, Mary, I hope and pray he is alive. You can rely on me to see what is needed to be done is done according to your wishes. He was my most promising trainee, and I had high expectations of him.'

Harold noticed Brithnoth's sadness; distress even, a feeling that for Brithnoth was almost alien. He recognized that although Brithnoth's feelings for the boy were such, he knew there were more pressing matters forthcoming this night. He placed his hand on Brithnoth's shoulder, and looked up to his friend's face. He wanted to show his heart; he didn't need to.

'You are, indeed, a good and trusted friend, Brithnoth. My father trusted you with his life, as do I. In future, you will see to it that any messenger will be accompanied and armed.'

He looked upon Brithnoth as an equal in arms and friendship, a brother in all but blood, no one else came near to this man, in either companionship or comradeship. He loved Brithnoth dearly.

'That's understood. Your father thought me his friend, and I was proud to be by his side as a youth.' replied the old warrior. He'd seen Harold brought into the world and saw Harold's father out of it. This night was a lesson well learned and he gave a half smile towards his fellow cohort, he mused. 'There's another thorn you might need to excise, Harold. Your woman, Edith Swanneck, arrived here a short while ago. She is inside. You might go to see her, since she is looking pensive and asking questions, and of the wrong persons too. I feel you ought to speak to her about her untimely presence here. You should go inside, Harold. The witan await your attendance and we have a long night ahead of us.' he said, knowing the witan was now the least of Harold's troubles.

Harold shivered. His body's sweat, now cold and clammy, making him feel very uncomfortable. He gave a despairing look of resignation, only to have the look returned by Brithnoth.

'Edith Swanneck. Damn! That is all we need at a time like this. No, you should speak to her. Try to steer her away from my path until things are clear, would you? She can be very trying at times. There is a time and a place for everything, and, as is her way, Edith is in the wrong place at the wrong time. I really need now to speak to the queen and Stigand. Would you let them both know I've arrived— oh, and do one thing for me, will you, my dear friend? Make your peace with Stigand. He is sometimes an idiot, but he is the head of the English Church, and he is on our side and one of us, as it happens. Your mutual coldness does neither of you any favours, Brithnoth. Can I rely on you both to come to terms?'

Brithnoth turned his gaze to the floor.

'I'm not promising anything, Harold.' he said feeling uneasy.

'Never mind, I'll speak to Stigand, and you two will become firm friends, or

you'll feel my wrath! Now, my good friend, go see that Edith Swanneck is sent to my rooms- and, if you have to, lock her in.'

'The job's as good as done, Harold. Go, get into some warm clothes.'

With a wave of a hand, Harold made his way to his dressing room where Tosser, his beloved eighteen-month-old grey whippet greeted him. He bolted the door behind him then threw his riding gloves upon the table. He bent down to pet her head and Tosser snuggled her long nose into Harold's groin, her tail wagging furiously, whining with pleasure to see her master.

'Hello, old girl. Have you been for a walk today, um?'

Tosser ran around the room, her excitement plain, jumping up at Harold for yet more fuss. They played tug with a leather strap for a few minutes with Harold losing the game, as usual.

'Calm down, calm down.' he said, settling Tosser on a large cushion, where she chewed on the leather strap, contented, but with one eye on her master, in case he was to make a move to leave without him. Tosser's ears pricked up, looking at the door. She barked then looked at Harold then looked back at the door once more. Harold sat comfortably in a low-backed chair and began unlacing his boots when he heard a knock at the door. Tosser barked once more, ready to move, but Harold stopped her.

'Stay,' he whispered softly, his index finger to his lips as if she were human. Harold moved swiftly to stand behind the door, his blade drawn.

'Who is it?' His heart was pounding, the adrenaline coursed through his veins. Harold he was ready to act at the slightest sign of anything out of the usual.

'It is I, your sister, Queen Edith. Are you dressed Harold?'

Harold felt relieved. He was used to stress, but this was different, there were dark forces abroad, and they had already come too close for comfort, and now he understood why.

'Yes, do come in, Edith, but take a look about you for anyone who may be in sight of you.' Passing his dagger to his left hand, he drew the bolt back slowly and silently. After Edith entered the room Harold closed and bolted the door behind her. He gazed at her as she turned toward him with her head bowed low. Before she could wipe it away, he saw a tear fall to the floor. From her demeanour, he noticed that his sister's distress was very evident. Taking a linen cloth from the table, he wiped her tears. He looked into her face to see her pain and her suffering taking hold of her delicate constitution. Tosser, wagging her tail, jumped up to greet Edith who patted her head. Tosser returned to her cushion to chew on the leather strap. Harold called for his servant boys to fill his hot tub with water and relaxed.

'Am I too late, Edith?' he asked, placing his arms around his sister, pulling her close to him, comforting her, stroking her hair. For a moment, there was silence as he thought of reassuring words for her, but he knew nothing would console her, not even time.

She gripped him tightly round his waist, pulling herself close to his strong chest. She felt his heart beating hard and fast, emanating, she thought, from an anxious desire for normality.

'He is still with us, Harold, but it will not be long now, of that I'm certain.' Edith pulled back to look up at her strong, steadfast brother, her eyes reddened and swollen, her complexion pale and drawn. Despite her earlier grooming, her hair looked lank; its sheen diminished and dry.

He spoke softly: 'A new beginning will shortly be upon us, Edith. You must be brave and look to the family for comfort and strength. My beloved sister, there is nothing more I can say to console you, except that our Lady Mary will take your husband to her bosom in peace. His suffering will soon be over, and you will be free from your torturous anguish,' he said, stroking her arm comfortingly.

'You're a good and wise man, a fine brother. I shall reward you with the lands I hold from the king,' she said as she let go of him and moved to seat herself in a comfortable high-backed chair, wringing her hands nervously. She stared at the floor, her despair for the future of England evident. For all her planning, she knew that only Harold held the key to England's permanence and stability.

'Edith,' he said, softly, 'You nor England needs not to buy my love! I do not require more land. It is your welfare and that of our country that I need to administer. I have enough, and as much as this, I have enough love. My sweet, devoted sister, go to your husband, he is your priority. I will be with you in Edward's bedchamber shortly. I first need to speak to Stigand. For the moment I have to change out of these filthy clothes.'

Edith kissed Harold's cheek and smiled. Harold pulled back the bolt and, slowly opened the door to check all was safe outside. Edith began to sob as she left the room into the protection of her maids followed by Harold's servant boys. Harold escorted Edith and her women, to the safety of the king's bedchamber. She entered the bedroom to be with her husband, leaving Harold to return to his dressing room.

As he entered his room, he closed and then once more drew the bolts the door behind him. He moved closer to the log fire and began to undress, ready to bathe then change his clothes for more suitable attire, when Tosser rushed to the door and barked. A moment later, another knock came at the door. 'Harold, it is Stigand,' said the unmistakable voice of the archbishop.

'Ah, Stigand, are you alone?'

'Harold, I'm quite alone.' Stigand replied.

Once more, Harold took up a position behind the door; his dagger poised, ready for use, should he require its service, and drew back the bolt. He wondered if this situation was to be the future for him, at least until he could resolve the problem of his personal safety.

'You can now enter, Stigand, and close the door behind you.' Stigand opened the door and entered the room, hobbling along pathetically from his tortured gout.

Closing the door behind him, he looked about the room. He was startled when Harold stepped away from the door behind him.

'I am sorry, old friend. I have had one or two problems this evening. I take no chances. Please sit. We need to talk, Harold said, while again sliding the

bolt to the locked position.

'You look cold, Harold. Have you been far? We had Brithnoth send out a messenger to bring you back. Where, on God's good soil, have you been? The situation here in the last few hours has moved on, and you obviously need to know what is in the wind.'

'I know what's in the wind. I've not been on this earth without learning how to smell out the snakes of Europe, my friend.' he replied, moving toward his clothes chest. He opened the large leather-covered wooden lid to reveal a wealth of fine silk and linen garments that even the overdressed Stigand had to admire. He dis-robed his filthy clothes then lowered himself into the hot, soapy tub.

'I am in dire need of this bath, Stigand. I hope you don't mind my bathing.'

Stigand made no reply and looked on as Harold took his bath, listening to Harold humorously bantering on about Stigand being over weight for his height.

At last, Harold rose from his bath and dried himself by the fire. Picking out his fresh attire, he stood warming the fresh clothes close to the log fire before donning them. Finally pulling on his soft sheepskin boots, lacing them up to his thighs. He turned to look Stigand in the eye. Harold's mood changed from humorous repose to one of solemn formal account.

'I have been ambushed, Stigand. I took a ride to Richmond along the river, more to gather my thoughts without distraction than anything else. Someone knew exactly where I was. Suffice to say, there was an attempt to assassinate me; but their work was in vain.' Stigand's mouth dropped wide open in disbelief.

'You were ambushed! By the most Holy Cross of Jesus, you encountered assassins, Harold! By God's grace, you are safely here! Did they escape?' he asked, making the sign of the cross. Stigand's eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed in concerned relief. 'I'm shocked that you, our locum princes, should be the target of some power that would see England engulfed in bloody strife.'

Harold explained how his attackers nearly had the better of him, that he was fit; his strength, a keen eye and luck had given him the edge over them.

'It looks as if these bastards might have killed the boy, Osfrid. The bodies of two of my attackers I left on the road. The third escaped. As for now, Arch Bishop we have more pressing matters to attend to.'

Harold had things that are more important on his mind. He needed to know if all members of the witan had arrived and, if so, what is their mood. Harold seated himself, taking in the warmth of the fire.

Stigand was convinced that all things regarding the witan would go well.

'There are a few of the witan who have still to come, but of those that are here, generally they are hopeful that they will arrive at a consensus that will see you crowned.' he said confidently.

Harold knew he would be their choice. He knew, too, the witan did not want to have a child on the throne, and the feeling was that the Ætheling, Edgar, could not see England safely through what outside pressures surely might lie ahead.

England needed unity, and many members that make up the witan had said that only Harold was capable of bringing this about successfully.

He was aware that the Northern Earls, Morcar, and Edwin were likely to oppose him, and, eventually, and with some persuasion, the two earls might come over to

his side and advance his cause. He looked thoughtful, and wondered if the time might soon be upon him to decide the fate of his beloved England, whether it would be upon his decision those men in his care would live or die.

At last, Harold spoke his mind.

'I'm not keen, Stigand, you know that. Is there no other way to overcome this difficulty? The crown is not mine by right of natural succession. I have spent half my life in diplomatic embassies throughout Europe, ensuring that the natural line of succession be followed; it all has come to naught.'

Harold remembered that the last legitimate heir to the throne, Edward-the Ætheling, died of some ague or other before he arrived in England. He was keen to keep to the natural Saxon lineage. That is how it should be, and it's why he had brought the young Prince Edward back. Apart from Edgar-the-Ætheling, there was no other Saxon to claim legitimately the throne. What was more, Edgar is twelve years of age.

Stigand's hands rested upon his knees as he bent forward, his eyes gazed at Harold.

'The Edward episode was nearly ten years ago, and there's no other offspring of Edmund Ironside left alive. Should the crown then go to Harald Sigurdsson or Svein Estrithson? I say an emphatic No!' he exclaimed adamantly, shaking his head. 'You said yourself that we must have a king of Saxon lineage. The days of the Norse-men must end, Harold.'

'Not necessarily.' Harold replied, deep in thought. 'But I'd prefer it that way. Estrithson surely has a good claim through the rightful line of succession. Of course, I wish to see a Saxon on the throne, but crowns won in battle produce a new house and lineage. Look at King Cnut. There are many more examples throughout Europe. My father helped Cnut to gain and keep his English crown; and the new king brought stability and law.'

Stigand rose and moved closer to the fire, and with his hands behind him, felt the warmth of the flames invigorating him. He turned to face the flames, warming himself, this time with a look of mischief about him that Harold should not see.

'Well, you see, Harold, the church has certain obligations to Rome. If either Sigurdsson or Estrithson were to take the crown, it would follow that Peter's Pence would not reach the Holy Father. The Pope would surely excommunicate the whole nation. This would lead to an outcry amongst the common people. There would be rebellion, civil war and bloodshed.' He turned about to face Harold. Harold shook his head, he knew what Stigand was up to, and he was not going to allow the archbishop any license.

'Bullshit!' cursed Harold. 'Look Stigand, I've known you long enough to know that you're afraid that you'd lose your archbishopric, and that your seat would go to some Scandinavian sycophant. Don't give me a load of bollocks. This is Earl Harold Godwinson, the learned son of my father who was the only man King Cnut trusted, you're speaking to.'

Harold stood up, and, looking squarely into Stigand's eyes, smiled, placed one hand on the shoulder of the archbishop. 'In the past, you have always been honest, Stigand. You don't need to bullshit me. We're both men of the world. For

God's sake. I'm your friend. Embarrassment is something we should take in our stride. If you're afraid you'll lose your incumbency, say so. I don't need you to give me excuses. We have a trust in each other. Don't allow that trust to slip. If I become king, I will need to be sure that trust is ultimate and absolute. If you mess up, you mess up. All you need to do is just admit you made an error; you know me well enough. Yes, I may be angry at some major crisis caused by a balls-up of your instigation or anyone else. When the arrows fall, at least I can be sure of your honesty and integrity. That's worth a great deal to me, more, perhaps, than you can imagine.' Harold smiled; his expression was that of soothing amicability and trust.

Stigand looked on, bemused, amazed, but his look turned to relief as Harold's smile gave him reassurance as he took the goblet of wine offered him.

'I'm sorry.' Stigand replied. 'I guess I should have been more honest with you this evening. You read me well enough, and you know my personal convictions. I do have England's welfare in my bosom— yours, too. You know that.' he said, smiling apologetically.

'Yes, you are but human, as am I, with all the frailties that come with it. I've been on God's good earth long enough to know how men are, and what they can be like, given circumstance and opportunity. Put your embarrassment aside. Come, Stigand. 'I'm overjoyed that we know everything there is to know of each other. We can go forward in perfect candour.'

I loved your father, Harold. He was a good man. You know what he did for me, don't you; but for him I would not be here. He so loved England, and he loved his fellow Englishmen.'

Harold feigned a cough. 'My father did what he did for his own reasons; he was no fool. He was clever, an astute organizer and pragmatist. The only time anything ever got past him was when King Edward confronted him across the river back in fifty-two. Do you recall the moment? It's been thirteen years now.' Harold poured two more goblets of wine, passing one to Stigand.

'I do, indeed, Harold. I recall how King Edward threw an ace that even your father, Earl Godwin, could not counter. The king was raging about having Godwin bringing the king's murdered brother, Alfred, back to life, and wanting Godwin to stand trial. The king was not a man to be trusted with a promise of any kind. Harold's father, on the other hand, was a man of integrity, a man of his word.' Stigand paused for a moment. 'When I look at you, and see your ways. I see in you your father.'

Harold looked embarrassed. He wished above all to emulate his father, whom he looked to with pride for his distinguished career. Stigand sneezed, smiling as he wiped his nose.

'Our Lady Mary will surely bless you, Stigand.' he said, grinning. 'You forget, Stigand, I was there. I saw it all first hand. You did your best, and our family appreciated your efforts. It was not a good time to be playing chess with the king. Father wanted an English church; not a church taken over by that cunning Robert of Jumièges and his Norman sycophants. Indeed, my father was a true and honest man.'

'Undeniably, he was.' Stigand nodded. 'All those good Saxon men of England

sorely miss him. The likes of your father we shall never see again.' the old man said, moving to sit in a rather comfortable horsehair and wool chair, caressing the arms of the chair admiring its lightweight frame made of iron with scroll-work so intricate the ironwork welding defied the imagination. There were three such chairs in the room, a chest for clothes and an ornate oak wardrobe that stood opposite the large stone fireplace holding the robes the king would have worn to meet foreign dignitaries. He placed his feet on a large pouffe so that he could warm them. Harold seated himself next to the Archbishop and turned to gaze deeply into his eyes.

'Well, Stigand, what do you suggest we do, um?'

Stigand's hands were pushed together as though in prayer. His slightly bowed head rose slowly.

'If we invite any of the three main claimants to be our king, we will have war with the other two. On the other hand, if we have you as our king, we might have war on three fronts. To have the Ætheling as king-well, you can only imagine.'

Harold knew it was a double-edged sword. He listened while Stigand continued apace.

'I have spoken with your sister. I asked her view on how she would feel if she were to be offered the crown, to become sole ruler in her own right.' Harold shook his head vigorously.

'She won't hear of it. I, too, have sounded her out on the matter. She is adamant that she will not participate in any way, no matter the consequences. She gives sound argument for her reasons; and I am in agreement with her views. I respect her wishes. We're not getting very far; are we?' Harold said searching for another way of resolving the problem.

'No, we're not. If you assume the crown. This is, of course, if the witan offered the throne to you, then you would have a loyal and responsive population behind you. We could easily defend ourselves against any odds. We have over half a million adult males to fight on our side and repel any invading forces.'

Harold looked thoughtful. The ridged furrows on his forehead became prominent as his fingers scratched his head.

'I see your reasoning, but half a million is far too big a number. I would put the figure at nearer one hundred and fifty thousand, and that would be pushing it a little far. The reality is twenty thousand. Men have to work their land, teach their children the art of farming and other crafts. You can't just pull these men away from their homes on the off chance that we may be at war in the near future. They would need feeding, housing, and the training would cost a fortune. What of the forty-two day's service the law requires? They could, in right of law, return to their homes and we'd have too few men left ready to fill the ranks of the fyrd. We have to arrange something better to cover these things. Then these men would need to congregate in the right places. Communication between the three groups would be a horrendous problem, too. No, it doesn't work that way, my old friend. A standing army of fyrdsmen needs payment. They would soon get bored with nothing to do, and what's more, they would be a drain on the fiscal resources. I've a much better idea, one that will

be cost-effective and sound,' Harold said, reaching for another goblet of wine. He stirred it with his finger, and then looked slowly up from the goblet. The wheels and cogs of Harold's brain were churning. He knew what he had to do.

'And that is?' his thumbs holding his chin, he listened intently to Harold's ideas.

Harold started to lay before Stigand his concepts. Harold wanted a small, but reliable force of housecarls, backed up by the select fyrd, trained and highly mobile. He knew he could get away with twenty-five thousand split to cover three areas. A body of dispatch riders would be set up every eight miles from a central point to communicate our needs and requirements. That way, he argued, his forces would be ready to move at a moment's notice. Given twenty-four hour's warning, this force could move anywhere in England, either by land or sea, and might counter any invasion.

'I have men in all three countries to feel the mood as to what is going on in each. If there is the slightest threat, we would be ready to deal with it.' Harold replied looking confident.

Stigand was aghast. 'Did you think up all this just now, Harold?'

He patted Stigand's knee. 'Of course I didn't. Swein and Gyrth have been working closely with me on this matter for some two years. Swein has created an impressive intelligence network, too. Gyrth has the housecarls training the select fyrd to fighting fitness and their readiness to fight is assured. These men are armed to the teeth. Brithnoth has the navy with fully equipped ships, and at his own expense. His commanders are fine men. I know, I have seen them on manoeuvres. If I were an invader, they would seriously worry me.'

'How are you going to pay for all this, Harold?' Stigand lifted the goblet to his lips, his eyes meeting Harold's head on.

'I'm not. You are. The church lands can fund the fyrd. I will fund the rest from the resources at my disposal, should I become king.' Stigand almost choked on his wine, coughing the red liquid over his feet. He wiped his mouth, as Harold looked on grinning.

'If you don't become king; what happens then?' he asked in puzzlement.

'That's not my problem. It becomes the problem for whoever is the next king, but I'll have the resources at the king's disposal, should it be needed.'

'You are a true Englishman, Harold. I will be proud to serve as your Archbishop. Now, I guess we ought to go to the king. It may well be the last we see of him.'

Harold cautiously unbolted the door, looked along the passageway, and they made their exit to the corridor.

'I saw Tostig a little while ago. I wonder, Harold, is he here for good or just for Edward's last days on this earth?' Harold gave a sigh, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

'I'm sorry to say, he'll be gone by the end of the week. For his anti-social behaviour, he's not shown any contrition whatsoever. I asked him to come for the week only. He could stay longer if things change with him, but, in any event, I have laid out the conditions to him that he must be gone as soon as possible. He has to show he can control his temper.' Harold scratched the back of his head.

He had not a clue what to do with his contumacious brother.

Stigand was thoughtful.

'You know, despite his effeminate ways and his flamboyant dress, I really like him. I've always got along well with Tostig. The queen told me that she would like to see him return to England permanently, not at court, just retired to some small town out of the way. Supply him with a few of his kind, and he should be no trouble.'

'I'm afraid Tostig wouldn't take kindly to being in England and to being left out of court life. He would become a nuisance. His disrespect for protocol would raise some eyebrows. I'm sorry, old chap, as much as I love my brother, he cannot be trusted to behave.'

'What about your other brothers? Have they expressed an opinion?'

Harold was becoming irritated, but kept his feelings to himself, but though he had better fill Stigand in on his brother's opinions.

'All have spoken their minds, except for Wulfnoth. He has never really had dealings with Tostig. Wulfnoth has been schooled most of his life away from court, and has had little contact with Tostig since he was a child. Swein and Gyrth aren't keen to see Tostig return. Privately, Gyrth would like to have more contact with him. Leofwine, on the other hand, can't stand the sight of him. He says Tostig is an embarrassment to us all. Swein is just too much for Tostig. They never could get along together, and both have always kept their distance.'

'I take your point, Harold. It is a pity, really. Tostig is quite clever in many respects, but he wasted his talents.' he said with a sigh.

'Yes, I know. He'd be an asset, if it were not for his temperament.' Harold's words were cut short rudely by shouting coming from the corridor that interrupted the calm of the night.

'You bastards! Let me in. Do you hear? Let me in!' Tostig shouted hysterically.

'What in the name of a dog's pizzle is going on?' Harold called from the far end of the corridor. Harold left Stigand's side and briskly strode toward the disturbed Tostig. Two guards were restraining Tostig roughly. Upon reaching the doorway to the king's private rooms, Harold saw his brother held forcibly to the floor. He looked down at his brother, and then nodded to the guards that it was all right to release Tostig from their grip.

'Who was it that gave you permission to leave your quarters, Tostig?'

'I don't need your permission, Harold, or from anyone to visit my beloved Edward.' Tostig replied indignantly, in a tone designed to be an irritant.

'You were told that I would have you brought to see Edward when the time was right to do so, and not before. I made that abundantly clear to you, Tostig. As it happens, I was about to have you brought from your quarters. What do I find when I arrive outside the king's door? I see my own brother ranting and screaming like a mad man.' Harold said tersely.

'You were going to let him die without my seeing him.'

'Look, Tostig. Stigand approaches. You can come inside with us, eh?. Be warned. If you dare to cause any sort of a scene, then I will have you arrested for disturbing the king's peace. I hope I have made myself abundantly clear?'

Harold said, his tone firm, almost menacing.

Stigand reached Harold, and seeing that all was well, tapped lightly on the door.

Garner, a trusted manservant of the king's bedchamber opened the door and ushered the three men inside to a room in semi-darkness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Harold, Stigand and Tostig entered the king's bedchamber in solemn mood, followed by Queen Edith's personal maid Monica. She brought a basket of herbs and gave to everyone present a small linen cloth. They all reached for a handful of the herbs then wrapped the herbs in the cloth.

Stigand winced. 'My God, Harold, the stench is unbearable.' he whispered as he gazed about the room and saw newly arrived nobles also holding the herb-filled cloths to their faces.

The assembled nobles had been, summoned there for one purpose, to hear the last words of a dying king.

King Edward lay semi-comatose, in a majestic oak-framed bed. Beautifully turned bedposts at each corner that curled snakelike to the ceiling above, it was a king's bed. The intricately carved curls directed the eye to the heavily woven wool and linen canopy depicting angels. Flickering light filled the room from large candles seemingly as thick as a man's arm and a foot tall set in clusters. Round iron candelabra hung by chains from a massive, oak-beamed ceiling. More light came from massive bowl candles, which were set into niches, casting shadows of the occupants on the walls. Iron stands holding thick tallow candles cast their yellow light, which combined tantalizingly with black candle smoke as it ascended, the soot depositing on the lime-plastered ceiling.

Harold stood passively by the king's bedside, dropped his herbs onto the bed, and held out his hands toward his sister, Queen Edith. His eyes closely followed her movements as she approached him.

'I'm sorry, Harold.' she said, placing her head upon his chest. She felt his warmth, and listened to Harold's heart beating slowly and strongly. She felt comforted.

Harold looked over her shoulder, gazing down at his king. He stroked Edith's head and winced. Edward's breath brought forth an obnoxious odour that Harold tried his best to avoid. He brought the perfumed cloth to his nose then steered his sister away from the bed.

The king's living, yet decomposing body fought a desperate battle to stay alive. It was a battle the king could never hope to win; but the will within him to live had subsided. The visions of Edward's delirium took him back and forth to his youth, to his cerebral battles with Harold's father, Earl Godwin.

Those assembled in the room looked on, remaining silent throughout, watching every interaction of their queen with Earl Harold. Every now and then, someone would move over to the open window to gain a breath of fresh air, then return to allow someone else to do the same.

He returned his gaze to the king, but as he did so, his nostrils caught the king's stench; the rotting flesh made him feel sick. If, he thought. I was alone with Edward; surely, I would spit upon him. He suppressed the temptation to

bring his thoughts to fruition. He felt an urge to whisper into the king's ear a voice that seemed to resonate within him, Hurry up and die, you bastard, the country is waiting for a real king. He took a firm grip upon his obsession. Restrain yourself, Harold. For the love of all that's right, you're so close; don't ruin this opportunity.

He understood well the situation. Edward was dying and, with him the house of Cedric. He didn't care all that much, as long as a Saxon was on the throne. Edward was half Saxon; the other half was Norman stock.

He approached, Swein, and he led him to the window.

'You know this circumstance is so dire that the kingdom he ruled will die with him. Well, I'm determined that's not going to happen.' he whispered.

'I understand. You've made up your mind then.'

As he spoke, Harold's heart was full of bitterness.

'If only the king had been wiser in his political judgements. Our family's relationship with him would have been far less stressful had the king been kinder to his countrymen than Edward had allowed. I have always hated the cunning bastard! Our father should have killed him, Swein. However, now surely is the time to make my opening move? I hope you have all our plans in place.' Swein nodded, then turned to gaze down upon a man who hated him so very much.

Harold further contemplated the problems of the coming year, and the prognosis did not look good. Harold turned to whisper to his sister. He reached out, touching her hand gently, while looking apologetically for the interruption to their whispered discourse. He wanted to say something positive to her, but for the moment, there was nothing forthcoming.

'Edith, how long do you think it will be before the end?' he asked.

'He will surely expire before the morning.' she replied, 'He's peaceful at the moment, but then he becomes fitful and appears frightened for his mortal soul.' Her eyes were moist as she looked into her beloved elder sibling's face. She read a mixture of emotions emanating from Harold's eyes, his ever-changing facial expressions, and remembered the times she sought comfort in many of Harold's wise idioms.

'We're but children in the bodies of adults.' she recalled He'd once said. She sensed Harold's coldness and ambivalence toward her husband as he stood staring dispassionately at his king.

He could not help but speak his mind, and turned to his sister, whispering.

'Many would take the view that Edward has much to answer for, Edith. By procrastination and stealth, the king did our country much damage. Though his reign was peaceful, it might have seemed different from his perspective. What might come next, only God and the angels above can see. We make our fortunes by our own decisions. Edward held the fate of his people in his hands. He did not understand that by his actions, they would be affected; nor, too, I suspect, did he care less. Neither could he understand that he had a responsibility to protect his subjects.' Harold complained under his breath. He shook his head as his innermost feelings took hold. 'His tendency to proffer correctly from many a false premise was, for me sophistry, Edith. He was a fool, a bloody fool.' Harold continued, glancing politely about the room making sure he was not

overheard.

Edith gripped his arm, knowingly. 'Credo-ut-intelligam.' she whispered. She had never really comprehended her husband. His often erratic and impulsive decision-making, nor his sometimes odd behaviour. Now she understood the past, the king's ill reasoning, of her father's actions and that of Harold's firm yet positive responses, and it comforted her. She kissed Harold gently on his cheek. She then picked up some aromatic herbs from a basket, and placed the herbs under Edward's pillow and around the bedside. She bent to kiss her once estranged husband and king on his forehead. She winced, withdrawing quickly; the pungent odour of Edward's breath was too much for her sensibilities, she felt nauseous. Holding her rosary, she began to recite prayers then moved aside so that Stigand could sprinkle holy water upon the dying man, mumbling a prayer as he did so.

She noticed Harold had moved back next to Swein, speaking in whispered tones. Edith knew that Harold was a man out of his time, a good man, better than most in his position and status. At forty-two years, he looked, she mused, much younger than did many men his age. He was strong and muscular, rugged, yet handsome and stood taller than most men; was well-proportioned and very fit. She liked his fresh, yet ruddy coloured complexion that, she thought, had a slightly used look. He had grown a very long ginger moustache that flowed around to his cheekbones that hid a small scar, a relic he gained from the wars fought against the Welsh as a young man. She admired Harold's balanced fierceness; yet tempered with kind eyes. She had often asked him to cut his bright auburn hair she thought was far too long, but he always resisted. His curled locks always looked somewhat unkempt, giving him a too youthful flair for his age. Edith often watched as his deep blue eyes, warm and inviting, would make women swoon to him, as soon as he noticed them. She inwardly smiled recalling how he so often had to fend off their advances, sometimes to the point of rudeness. Brithnoth, she recalled, had told her that Harold was fearless in the heat of battle, brave, but never to the point of recklessness. Few men had minds as sharp, with an intelligence few could match. He was, she mused, a general, a tactician, a politician, and diplomat beyond reproach, born years before his time.

Harold gazed idly about the dimly lit room, with its heavy, colourful tapestries depicted various scenes. In particular, he admired a victorious hunting scene, with the likeness remarkably like that of the king standing over a killed deer, while children frolicked in the background with mythical beasts in dark green forests near waterfalls.

Stirring from his fitful narcosis, Edward's cold, clammy hand slowly reached out. Edith clasped it gently while Monika adjusted his head on the pillow and straightened his linen head-cap, then wiped the king's mouth of his saliva.

Edith reflected upon her early years with him. She had always been aware that Edward had despised her all their married life. She felt nothing but resentment; the forced marriage had been nothing more than a political manoeuvre which she and the king bitterly regretted. She had grown aggrieved. She hated being a pawn in a game of court and European politics.

Edith patted Edward's hand and spoke a few soothing words into his ear, then replaced his hand across his chest, and re-joined her brother, Harold, who was

whispering in Latin into the ear of his brother, Swein. She caught only the words, aut-vincere-aut-mori, and was shocked. She fastened her head veil as Monika tidied her mistress's gown; its blue diamond-edged sleeves with gold stitches reflected the flickering light of candles.

Edith's mood changed, from growing grief to that of bitter regret that intrigues once more, began rearing its ugly head, when she felt Harold take her hands in his, and gave a little squeeze. She saw the reassurance in his eyes, and it gave her some comfort; but it was not enough. There was something missing inside her, yet she could not quite understand what it was. Edith stuttered out the words that were in her heart; her private thoughts, but she did not expect they would come to her lips.

'I hated our father for coercing me into this marriage.' As she spoke, she turned to look down at her husband. 'Edward's homosexuality made me feel awful, just the thought made my skin crawl, and it sickened me.' she said in bitter tones. She turned her gaze to Harold.

'I never felt married. Edward made me feel like a leper, not so openly, but enough to show his misogyny towards me. I have no child by my husband, and now look at our predicament. It has complicated the matter of legal succession and has brought about the crisis the kingdom now faces. What is going to happen to England, and what will become of our family? Oh, Harold, I'm so sorry!' she bemoaned, resting her head in his mighty chest. Edith felt less queenly now than she ever had.

Everyone in the room heard her words, but none moved to speak with others to comment.

Whispering, as he stroked her hair.

'It's all in hand, Edith. The witan will decide the issue one way or another. As for the problems facing us from other quarters, well, we will deal with them as they arise. Plans are in hand to keep England safe from the evil forces that Edward once courted. I will look after you, Edith; I have seen to that. Fear not. There's no need for you to worry.'

'What are you to do with Tostig?' she asked. 'Are you going to allow him to stay here with us? He has always been close to my heart, despite his waywardness' She looked across the room at Tostig and noticed he was pensive and apprehensive.

'You know about he and Edward, don't you? In his mind Tostig is still a child. Edward forced him to be this way. He's bound to be resentful.'

'The world knows about the love affair between Tostig and Edward. They didn't exactly keep it a secret. Tostig will need to be out of the country a while longer, at least until we can sort the problems out in our north. Tostig will have to show contrition towards the people he hurt so grievously. They won't let him back into the earldom if he doesn't. Then, and only then, will we have a chance of consolidating our position, knowing we have the strength to resist any two-pronged diplomatic approach.'

He was thoughtful. He knew that Edward had no use for any Godwinson, except Tostig, his tall, thirty-nine-year-old brother. He gazed at Tostig. His brother's rugged complexion and staring eyes that gave one the impression he was

elsewhere while one was in his company. He craned his head to Swein.

'I wish Tostig wasn't so open and an overtly effeminate homosexual. He's greedy, jealous, perverted and bitter, all but powerless, thank goodness.' Swein nodded, but gave no reply.

Harold reminisced to the days when Edward and Tostig would often go hunting alone together, spending their time away in small lodges in the hunting grounds of the south of England. Tostig had bragged to him of how he had the king's ear, but all that was now over.

He ushered Tostig to come nearer, to witness his lover's last moments and to stand amid his brothers.

Tostig wept pitifully, moaned, stepped forward, then threw himself onto the king's bed in a vain attempt to kiss Edward one last time. Tears streamed down his face as he saw his lover fading away.

'In the name of Odin, Swein, get him off the king, and get him out of here!' he bellowed. Harold was grossly incensed and irritated with Tostig's undignified behaviour.

Swein and Leofwine stepped forward, attempting to pull Tostig off the bed, but it took the added intervention of Gyrth to remove their brother.

'Take him out, and get him drunk or something. Do anything to pacify him, but keep him away, even if it means killing him, do you hear? You had better go with them, Wulfnoth. Tostig may cause them some trouble,' said Harold, his terse whisper barely audible in an attempt to bring some sort of dignity to the unfolding drama.

Gyrth managed to gain a grip on Tostig. Tenuous as it was, they managed to lift his brother free of the king.

'Come on, Tostig. We can't have a scene in the king's bedchamber now.' Gyrth whispered in his brother's ear. His brothers took hold of Tostig and led him away toward the door. Harold followed them into the corridor. The brothers almost had to drag Tostig. Swein and Gyrth half carried the weeping and deeply distressed Tostig to a place where he could at least be out of harm's way.

Tostig began to struggle; bawled pitifully, he called out viciously.

'You bastards could never leave us alone. You were always trying to keep us apart! We could have ruled together, did you know? Ruled together! Edward told me as much. You bastards, you've only allowed me into the country to see him die, then you'll exile me again! You bastards, I'll show you all. Just you wait and see!'

Harold knew Tostig was in no condition to fight with his brothers, his grief was too overpowering for that. He looked on as Tostig's legs, hardly able to sustain his own weight, shuddered along, assisted to his temporary exile. At last, they arrived at a place where Harold could be sure that Tostig would do no more harm to either the king or himself.

At the secured room, Harold ushered the guards who were playing five-stones on a bench to come forward to assist them.

'You two guards,' he called out, 'look after Earl Tostig. Make sure he doesn't leave this room; he is under arrest until such time as I alone give orders for his release. Keep the door locked; is that clear?' Harold's order was

emphatic.

The guards rose from their seat and, taking hold of Tostig by his arms, led Tostig into the cell. They sat him down and left the room, closing and locking the door behind them, leaving the weeping Tostig alone to his pitiful grief and torment.

In his sorrow, Tostig thought back on his time with his beloved Edward. He drifted off in a vivid world of fantasy, going back to when he had last made love with Edward. They had had sat under a tree in the forest, naked. Tostig had closed his eyes and glided off in the warmth of the summer sun when he heard Edward speak.

'I wanted you to rule by my side, Tostig, you know that; but your father forced me marry Edith.' Tostig opened his eyes a little, but the sun was too strong to allow him to look clearly at the man he loved. He moved closer to be able to see Edward more clearly, to gaze into his eyes, Edward's deep blue pools looking at him lovingly and longingly.

'You really mean that, my precious?'

'Yes, you know I do,' Edward had replied. Tostig bit his lower lip. He could feel his loins swelling once more. He caressed Edward's long white hair, smelling the scent of rose water on Edward's skin. He kissed Edward's shoulder then his neck. Edward responded, his hands searching.

Tostig, startled by the noise of laughter emanating from people in the corridor, realised his dream was over. He heard the two guards laugh at a joke one of them had told the brothers, Wulfnoth and Leofwine. Tostig looked through the bars, and watched as his brothers stood, fascinated, held deep in conversation with the guards who were now engrossed once more in the game of five-stones they had resumed playing. Tostig returned to his bench to mope, his dreams shattered.

Swein and Gyrth strolled a few paces down the narrow corridor, allowing the harassed Harold to walk on alone with his thoughts.

When Gyrth thought they were safe from the ears of others, he stopped to see what the other brothers were doing. Seeing the brothers occupied, he took the opportunity to speak privately with Swein; something they had not been able to do for a while.

'I've been thinking about you, Swein. You really don't like Tostig at all. You love him as a brother, as I do; yet, you seldom used to sit and speak with him as you do with me. We played together as children; we confided our innermost thoughts. Yet, Tostig never grew up. I do not understand. Why couldn't you ever seem to communicate with him?'

Gyrth took from his under-tunic a piece of linen cloth he had cut from their late father's shroud on the morning of his burial. He wrapped it around his fingers as his thoughts went out to their father, Earl Godwin. A tear welled and he turned away from his brother for a moment. He dabbed the wetness and replaced the cloth within his clothing. The tears were more for his brother, Tostig, but wanted not to show his grief to Swein. He wanted so much for Tostig to return to the fold, to be a true and loyal Godwinson.

A break in the cloud brought the moon into view, illuminating both men through the glazed window set deep into the niche.

There was a moment of silence as Swein collected his thoughts. He had always been impressed with Gyrth's ability to understand, decipher, and disseminate all political and military equations with ease. He placed a hand gently upon Gyrth's shoulder. Why he did so, he was not sure. He detected sadness in his brother's demeanour but could not comprehend why he felt this way.

'You are a man of few words, Gyrth,' said Swein, almost apologetically. 'I guess it's because you're the wiser of the two of us. You always were the tactician, working closely with Harold. I look up to Harold so much. He is wise and brave, yet has about him a gentle softness one doesn't often see in a warrior. He has an honesty that I admire so much. You also have similar qualities.'

Swein looked over at his younger brothers some few paces away, still engrossed in playful contentment with Tostig's guards. Then continued apace.

'Could you see Harold as king? No, seriously, could you?' he asked, gazing into his brother's face, looking for some kind of empathy for the question.

'Harold. Well, he's way ahead of both of us.' He knew Harold had those special qualities rarely found combined in one person. Swein was not sure Harold had enough votes to make him king yet. 'I'm sure he doesn't seek kingship.' he continued, 'In any case, it'll be the witan to decide who is to become king. Harold will be high on the list of those in the running. You know I'm close to him, and we get on well. He knows that I have my limitations and I trust him. He trusts me to do what is required when needed. Though younger than myself, he is the boss in this family, and we should be grateful we have such a brother. I could never in a lifetime come close to being as bright and intelligent as Harold.'

'Hey-don't put yourself down, Swein. You are a good man. All right, so you can't keep from womanising. We all have some vices, some more, some less. Just look at Tostig! Compared to him, you are a saint! How many children from different women have you to-date?'

Gyrth grinned. He knew Swein was a tolerable sort of guy. Swein's reply was almost apologetic.

'God alone knows. I just wish I could leave women alone. I really do. Like water falling from the sky, it just happens. I can't help falling in love with a pretty face. Always I seem to get into trouble for it. I have always looked after any offspring I knew of, Gyrth, you know that. The king put me on trial allegedly for raping the Abbess of Leominster. I felt that was unfair. We were deeply in love. Her family accused me of abducting and raping her. This accusation was not a good thing to be dealing with at that time. I have always known Edward felt we were a contumacious family. Apart from Tostig, he hated all us Godwinsons. He loathed me, especially. Then he had me outlawed, too! At least I don't screw boys and get involved with animals. Mind you, I've slept with a few women who've looked like dogs in my time.' he said, grinning.

'Me, too.' Gyrth replied with a grin, 'Me, too.'

'Look here. As we are alone for a few moments, Gyrth. I need this opportunity

to speak to you on a more serious matter.'

Swein looked about for Wulfnoth and Leofwine, and seeing they were still engaged in conversation with the guards, he motioned Gyrth to follow him a few paces farther down the corridor. He led him to a niche that allowed them to see in all directions, yet permitted some privacy. He spoke in a low, barely audible voice.

'We have a job to do shortly, Gyrth. I have identified two female Norman spies. Now they've been discovered; we need to cease their operations.'

'Really, Swein, who are they, and how did you discover them?' he asked with a look of utter surprise.

'They're Lady Ethelfrith and her cousin, the Lady Saethryd. If you recall, they came to court as children when Edward had the Normans by his side. They stayed behind when we expelled the Normans from Edward's court. No one ever thought the women would turn and become tools for the Norman cause. We took them in, educated them, and now they've turned on us! That was their gratitude! As for how we found them, well, we knew information was leaking from sources close to Harold. We looked for the least noise. By that, I mean the least likely source. That would be where the danger lay. Follow the silence and filter out the sounds.' Swein lowered his voice, brought his mouth closer to Gyrth's ear. 'I've been utilizing their network for our own cause. I uncovered a plot to kill Harold. It's time to clear up the scum and look after our own fortunes. Harold knows nothing of the activities of these two women. He likes them both. I doubt he would take kindly to their deaths. Though how we accomplish this task is another matter. We could make their demise look like the result of a thievery, but we must do it alone and in total secrecy.'

'So, we eliminate them both, then?' Gyrth bit his lip and looked down to his feet. 'I'm never keen on killing women, especially in cold blood. Could we not use them to our advantage? I don't like it. It smells like we are no better than Normans.' Gyrth looked up to gaze into the face of his elder brother, frowning.

'Oh, getting a conscience, are we, Gyrth? What would you say, if knowing some weakness, the Normans walked into England and were able to do so because they knew our every movement? Come on, man; see the reality. These women have to die. We just do it quietly, that's all. I have replaced them in their network with those loyal to us. Only information we deliver to them gets back to both that Norman bastard and Sigurdsson.' Swein paused for a moment to clear his throat.

'Rumour has it that Svein Estrithson is thinking about making his presence felt also. It happens that Sigurdsson's old-time rival, Magnus, is in conflict with Estrithson, chasing each other around the country, cat-and-mouse style. That, brother, is good news for us. We gain time to strengthen our forces, and keep their morale high. If an invasion is attempted, we will be ready for a two-pronged assault. We will have supplies in place, ready to use in case of any eventuality. Harold and I have spoken at length of the possibilities and of our options when the king dies. We must first deal with the two women who have sold their souls to the devil. Are you agreed.'

'You speak with strong and fair and convincing arguments, Swein. If it needs doing, then we must act quickly. I suggest we eliminate them as soon as we are

clear of any curious eyes.' replied Gyrth, noticing Swein smiling with relief, and he patted Swein on his shoulder.

'These women meet to have privacy in the corridor that leads to the palace bell-tower. The court thinks they are lovers, so the women feel safe in their deliberations. We will wait for them there.'

Noticing their youngest brothers approaching and too close for comfort, Swein and Gyrth strolled slowly back down the corridor.

'Ah, Wulfnoth, Leofwine, You have finished playing with the guards, then?' Swein inquired.

Wulfnoth peered at Swein, smiled, but did not answer. Inquisitively Wulfnoth asked yet another of his annoying questions of his long-suffering brother.

'Though I've recently finished my formal education, there's still much to learn from you Swein. However, I have been distant from my family through my schooling. Now it is time my brothers enlightened me to the world of political intrigue. There is a lot I do not fully understand about the king, my brother, Tostig, and our sister, Edith. Tell me Swein, why didn't Edith bring forth issue, and why did Edward marry Edith if he did not wish to have children by her? These enigmas I must understand.' The face of the youngster looked on longingly, missing Swein's irritation.

Swein halted. He turned to face Wulfnoth. Wanting to suffocate his youngest brother bothered him, or the very least sew his lips together. If only, he mused, I could finish the boy's education in one sentence. Only then would I gain peace from this youth's pathological need to ask questions. He placed a hand on Wulfnoth's shoulder.

'Little brother. Indeed you're not yet wise in the ways of this world. You have to understand how things happen at court. The king is a homosexual; you know this already. He has to secure the succession, and that means he has to be legally married and have legitimate children. Look, this explanation is not easy for me, Wulfnoth. To be blunt, this is what happened. What I am about to tell you goes no further than the end of your nose, is that fully understood?' He saw that Wulfnoth eagerly nodded his agreement.

'Well now, the king has boys in his bedchamber. They look after his every need, and that includes his physical needs, too. I don't know why I'm telling you this, but I guess you need to know. Edward cannot gain an erection unless there is a male in his thoughts.' Swein, feeling decidedly uncomfortable, beckoned Wulfnoth to a small private room and gave the young man the gory details of how, how for Edith, this filthy, disgusting act was accomplished. He really didn't want to, but did so to shut him up, once and for all.

'Um?- err-our sister was a dutiful wife, and did as she was ordered. She then left the king to his boys, in the sure hope that she was now pregnant. This went on for some time until it was obvious that Edward was not going to comply with the wishes of the witan and the clergy to produce an heir. Anyway, when our family fell out of favour with the king, we left the country. Edward seized the opportunity and sent Edith away to Wherwell Abbey, then, shortly after to Wilton nunnery to await divorce. Edward was claiming that she was barren. That, under these circumstances, is how things are. You were just a babe-in-arms when all

this was happening.'

Wulfnoth, visibly shocked and began seething with hatred for King Edward.

'Edward! He is an utter bastard, an absolute swine! My sister treated like a cow, used as a brood mare for that turd, then discarded, as if she was some old rag! I hope his end is slow and painful, Swein, I surely do!' he grimaced as he clenched his fists in anger. The thought of his elder sister's ill treatment meted out by the king sneaked like a worm into his mind and wondered. If God doesn't take him this night, I will surely help him on his journey another day. Wulfnoth gazed into the blackness of the night, still seething.

Swein sensed the youth's aggression was overpowering his normal sensibilities, and placed a hand upon his young man's shoulder and slowly shook his head.

'Wulfnoth, you really don't have a clue, do you? Edward is the king, and if the king orders you to sit and shit, you sit and shit. Is that understood?' With a look of disgust written upon his face, Wulfnoth nodded, his overt facial expressions reinforcing his obvious contempt for his king. Yet he was trying hard to compose himself, at least outwardly

'What are we to do about Tostig? Is he to stay within the family, Swein?'

'Tostig is exiled for his cruelty and stupidity in the north, you know, excessive taxation, the usual stuff. Wrongly, Edward accused Tostig and Edith of murdering of Gospatric. The man was a member of one of the powerful Bambrough families from Northumbria. When he and Tostig were returning from a pilgrimage to Rome, bandits ambushed Gospatric's party and Gospatric was killed in the attack. The thought was that he and our sister had something to do with his death, but it plot was never proven. Between you and me— again, this goes no further, mind. He and Edith were as guilty as hell. As you know, Tostig ended up losing his earldom. We, your elder brothers, along with the king, decided it was best to send him away, out of the country for a while. Tostig upset many people. Morcar was given Tostig's earldom, at least until Tostig could learn to behave himself. Not all Tostig's problems were his own fault, but most were.'

They strolled on down the corridor, stopping now and then for Swein to gather his thoughts. I guess I'll fill him in with the gory details; I'll get no peace, otherwise, mused.

'Did Tostig raise an army against Morcar, and his brother, Edwin?'

'Only against Edwin, and he got his arse kicked royally for his trouble. He thought better of it than to go against his kin. We may have made a bad decision under the circumstances, but we now have the north under some control. However, it might not remain that way for long if Harold cannot make some headway with Morcar and Edwin. Tostig became a laughing stock. He could no longer hold his head up in a brothel, let alone the king's court, Wulfnoth. You heard he raped a nun.' Wulfnoth nodded. 'He did much more besides.' Swein continued. 'So you see, he has to be out of the way, or the people will show their discontent as they did some years back. We cannot risk civil unrest now.'

'Edith was not happy to see him leave; she was very upset. She loves Tostig dearly. They are very close. Do you think, Swein, that she could persuade Harold to allow him to stay?'

'Perhaps, but we've all agreed this way is best, at least for a while. In any case, Edith had her own problems with Tostig. With the threat of divorce hanging over her head some years before, she could have done without the added problems of Tostig's absurd behaviour. As you know, we Godwinsons were never exactly agreeable to Edward. Our retreat into self-imposed exile, gave us time to regroup, but we lost everything. When we returned, our father had a head-to-head encounter with the king. As luck would have it, the forces of the king sided with our father and the king slunk away. Edward left with too few men to make a fight of it. It was with strength that we negotiated our way back into England. We had the Normans banished from the court and an English archbishop again. The king had little option but to agree to our father's terms. You were, again, but a baby, and obviously, you were never privy to such matters, until now.'

'I know so little. And the Abbess of Leominster, what became of her?'

'Wulfnoth shut your mouth!' Swein's tone and demeanour turned vicious.

'If you ask me one more bloody question, I will twist your head around so when you're walking north, you will be looking south! Is that fully understood?' Wulfnoth nodded sheepishly

Swein motioned the group should now follow him down the corridor.

'Come along. We had better get back to witness the king's final moments.'

Swein said feeling hard to contain his annoyance of Wulfnoth, and indicated as much to Gyrth with a stern look.

Leofwine and Wulfnoth strolled along the corridor that was just wide enough for two to walk comfortably, side by side.

'Oh, you touched a nerve, Wulfnoth. In future, you had better not mention the abbess. Swein gets very touchy when someone brings up the subject of the abbess. You may have a good education, but you need an education in brotherly diplomacy, too. I'll fill you in on the finer details one of these days.'

'Thank you, Leofwine. I will remember that.'

'For the sake of Job, stop saying thank you, it gets on my nerves, too!'

Leofwine growled, as the brothers re-entered the king's bedchamber.

On seeing his brothers enter the room, Harold motioned towards Wulfnoth for him to come and stand beside him.

'I want you to stay with me, Wulfnoth. You must witness the events as they unfold.' Harold's soft, almost fatherly tones were mellow and controlled.

The king stirred for a moment, the flickering yellow light catching the pallor of his complexion. His breath smelled of the sweet odour of internal decomposition. His skin was now a pale jaundiced yellow, his long white beard drenched with water he perpetually demanded to quench his thirst.

Stigand approached the physician and asked for an opinion on the king's condition. Edward's doctor tasted the king's urine for the last time and returned with the diagnosis that the king's mellitus was an untreatable disease, and physicians could do nothing.

There were few sounds in the bedchamber, other than the low weeping of the women, who saw to the king's needs, and the low, barely audible mumble, and whispers from one or two of the assembled members of the witan.

In a little niche in the private chapel next to the bedchamber, five monks

sang softly their chants for the safekeeping of the king's soul in Latin. Their lilting harmony provided a comfort to all who were able to attend Edward's final hours on this mortal earth.

The room soon filled with those summoned to witness the king's last will and testament. Edward's dying words had to be recorded and attested by all those assembled. Archbishop Stigand stood nearby ready to hear the king's last confession.

Edward clumsily lifted his hand, feeling around blindly and asked for the Earl of Wessex.

'Harold, are you here?' asked Edward searching the room with eyes that were useless.

Harold spoke softly to his king.

'My Lord, I am here.' he replied, glancing about the room beckoning those present to stand around the bedside. 'It is I, Harold, My Lord. What is it you wish of me?'

Edward stuttered for a few moments, his mouth dry, in need of water.

Edith wet his lips, while, Ebba, the wife of the thegn Regnhere of Coventry, fluffed his pillow, so that he felt a little more comfortable. Harold looked around to all those present, then ushered them even closer, making sure they would be witness to the king's final words.

In a soft but audible voice, Edward spoke,

'Harold, come closer. I have something to say.' whispered the king, his right hand reaching out towards Harold's voice. Harold took the king's hand in his, and leaned close to Edward's ear. He held his breath, the nauseating stench ever more powerful. Harold winced and turned his head so as not to breathe in the sickening fumes.

'Harold, you must take care of my people. I leave and entrust the safety of the kingdom in your hands. Do you understand?' Edward coughed, almost choked, but regained his composure. He was failing fast and all about him could see he was not in any comfort.

'I comprehend your wishes, and I will do your bidding, Sire. You may rest in the knowledge that England will be well and fairly governed by my hand.' He felt Edward clasp his hand more firmly.

'That is my wish.' nodding his agreement to Harold's reply.

Edward turned his head towards the sound of the now weeping Queen Edith, and lifted his hand once more. As Edith took Edward's hand in hers, he felt a tear-drop from his queen fall onto his wrist. His head turning toward her voice, his unseeing eyes opened to the blackness of his world, grasping in frustrated yearning for one last glimpse of his queen.

'Take this woman, Harold, and keep her safe from harm. She is a goodly woman. In past years, I have treated her unkindly. Might the Lord forgive me my neglect of her.' His eyes closed, falling into a dream world of assorted images and memories until his sleep became deeper, soon to be a deep coma. Harold moved back to stand beside Wulfnoth, leaving their sister beside her husband.

'The king is very still, Harold. Is he now dead?' Glancing at Harold, his youthful naïveté obvious to all in the room.

'No, but it won't be too long, little brother. Be patient. Jesus will call him when he is ready to take him into paradise. That is when our troubles will begin. Jesus will test our resolve to govern vicariously this land well. Only Edward can answer to God for his life's deeds. I'm sure we could do no worse in his stead.' Harold placed his arm reassuringly around Wulfnoth's shoulder and noticed Brithnoth enter the room with Tostig.

'Will Tostig behave, Brithnoth?' he asked, looking for reassurance from the old man.

'He promises nothing, Harold.'

Edith turned to speak to the assembled magnates who were now kneeling around the bedside before their king.

'Gentlemen, I would ask you all now to leave the king's bedchamber while we prepare our king for death. As the moment approaches, I will summon you all to witness the moment of the king's journey into paradise.'

The Queen and the Ladies of the king's bedchamber solemnly prepared the comatose Edward for his last journey. They washed his person, brushed his long white hair, and tidied his bedclothes. The women then sat in prayer for a short while. Seeing the time had come ushered the witan and Harold back into the bedchamber.

Archbishop Stigand and Bishop Wulfstan, both tall, well-fed men, came forward. Stigand commanded the assembled to kneel. He gave a long oration about the king's life then led a prayer for Edward's soul.

Edward's breathing became shallower then altogether ceased. They all fell silent. Edward's body convulsed, then again, so that the women held him down until the convulsions ceased. King Edward's twenty-three years reign was at an end. The king was dead. The House of Cedric was no more.

'Bastards! You're all bastards.' shouted Tostig. 'You let him die. You killed him. Bastards!' As Tostig regurgitated the words, he felt a hand grip his jugular and he fell to the floor, unconscious.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Brithnoth gazed toward his queen. The flickering candlelight upon her face reflected her tears like stars on a frosty night. All his life he had been a warrior. There were few things he had not seen or experienced. But this situation was different. He felt lost, but understood only Harold held the key to what may happen in the forthcoming months. He raised his hand to gain Edith's attention. Earl Godwin had given Brithnoth charge to protect his daughter. He had known her throughout her childhood and he knew Edith trusted him completely. Upon her father's death Brithnoth became her surrogate father, much more than a friend. He was her confessor and confidant.

Edith never felt close enough to Stigand to confide in him her innermost thoughts, as she could with the mighty and trustworthy Brithnoth, who would often stroll with her in the garden. She continually felt his strength of character and was always truthful to her. He was like a protective wall around her. Nothing could harm her when he or Harold was in her presence. She pondered on her condition: My circumstance and situation have changed. Even Harold and my beloved Brithnoth might not be able sort out the entangled web my late husband

weaved, she thought. She noticed the aged warrior vying for her attention and smiled tearfully at him.

Brithnoth returned her smile. She will never be alone. This dear, sweet child; the mother of our country has put up with so much, he thought.

'Harold and I will be strong for you, Edith.' he whispered as he reached out his hand to her. 'Edith, my dear, we need to talk.' he said, as he watched Gyrth and Swein escort the distressed Tostig from the bedchamber. She took Brithnoth's outstretched hand in hers, but her sobbing clearly was not to cease easily. Her head fell into the giant's chest, her emotions were barely under control. All her fears were now turning to grim reality.

'Brithnoth, my dear friend.' she said as she gripped him tightly.

'Be calm, my dear.' The old warrior said stroking hair, reassuringly. 'Harold has told you; look to who you have around you. The kingdom will be safe in Harold's hands. Your brother will see to your needs and those of the people, rest assured.' he said, as he reached out with his free hand to clasp Harold's hand in his.

She felt Brithnoth's warmth, even through his mail armour, and did not notice the odour of his unwashed jerkin as she turned to gaze into the eyes of her beloved brother, Harold. Her heart was thumping, her mind racing; the palms of her hands were moist.

'All will be well. Won't it, Harold?' she asked.

'Of course, my dear. I'll see that you're safe, Edith. I want you to go to Winchester. I will arrange for the journey after we have buried Edward's body.' he said, smiling reassuringly in an attempt to keep Edith busy with thoughts of an impending journey. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

'I understand, Harold. Yet I fear war will come to England now that my husband is gone. You are not safe, nor are your youngest children, Gunnhild and Gytha, or your sweet love, Edith Swanneck. The boy, Cedric, he is special to you too. He is an innocent, Harold. Your elder children, they must also be given them safe haven. The five boys must go to Ireland. They will be safe there. I have to tell you now, that if all goes to the wolves, I will use my wealth and power to rid this country of any foreigners. Edward told me of a dream. It foretold of a great calamity, of death and sorrow. He knew what was to come. I fear it is all in revenge towards our father and our family. Harold, what is to be done? Will we survive this impending nightmare?' she asked, noticing him bending low to meet her eyes.

'Of course we will. We are strong— just as strong as any family can be. All will be well. Will you put your faith and trust in me, Edith, um?' he asked, reassuringly. Edith was not so sure; even Harold could not work a miracle.

Harold took Edith from Brithnoth's grip and held his sister closely in his arms, kissed her brow and ushered her toward the door. As he opened the door she turned to speak. He put his fingers to his lips, indicating there was nothing she could say that he had not thought of previously. Reassured, Edith knew that in Harold's hands England was safe.

'We will talk in the morning, Edith. Get some rest; you are so tired.' he said, watching as she walked down the corridor with Monicka's arm around her.

Monicka turned to gaze back over her shoulder at him. He smiled back and slowly nodded. He knew Monicka well and understood her look was one of reassurance; that she would see to Edith's needs. He closed the door and turned to face Brithnoth.

Brithnoth placed his hand upon Harold's shoulder and whispered, his tone thoughtful, and above all, careful.

'I'm genuinely worried for Edith's capacity to handle the coming days. I sincerely hope that she will be able to cope with her distress. I'm not sure she's really capable of being on her own at this time, Harold.'

Harold nodded, his face wearing a look of resignation. He stared blankly back at the door. Brithnoth tugged at his arm, bringing him back from wherever his thoughts had taken him to the present.

'We've witnessed and understood what the king said, and the witan are ready to form the Gemot. I've them waiting in the Great Hall for us. The lateness of the hour is going to be in our favour, so we must acknowledge and confirm Edward's inviolable bequest of the kingdom to you, before his death. Can we rely on you, Harold?'

Harold felt stunned. He gazed down at the late king's body. He had the realm upon his shoulders and he needed to compose himself, to summon up superhuman strength. His determination was going to get England through this annus horribilis. He gazed back at Brithnoth, and, with a smile, a reassuring expression settled upon his face.

'Yes, you know you can. But some of the witan might feel that I'm not fit for the office, Brithnoth. As for the rest of the council? Well, we'll just have to wait and see.'

Brithnoth held onto Harold's arm, gripping it firmly, he murmured close to his ear.

, 'Good. I will go to the Great Hall and brief them now. Edwin and Morcar will put up some resistance to your proposed accession; for all the good, it will do them. I am sure the others will make good any shortfall in the voting. However, with a twist of an arm here and a severe look there, we will gain a unanimous vote. Be of stout heart, Harold. You are respected, with many good friends who love you.'

Brithnoth was apprehensive at the thought of his first major role in the making of a king. He left the bedchamber, leaving Harold alone to his thoughts.

Harold thought back on how stupid Edward had been to court such troubles from rulers who were but distant claimants. He knew they would come forward to press their claims to England's rich throne. He thought on the bitterness between his father and the king that led Edward to promise the crown of England to foreign magnates upon his death in return for peace. He recalled telling the king it was unwise. In any event, he thought, the witan have to decide what is to be, or accept me as their king. Time is short, he mused, and a decision has to be made this very morning, and it's already past the hour of one. Their decision is final and shall determine whether the peace of the kingdom lies with me, or abroad.

Composed, felt ready to face the witan. He took one last look at Edward's lifeless corpse. He leave the room with the dead king's body lying foul smelling and ready to be prepared for burial. As he opened the door, he saw the king's chambermaids waiting outside, sobbing. He motioned toward the Lady Marion, the eldest of the king's chambermaids. As she stepped forward, he placed a hand on her shoulder and whispered to her.

'You may now see to the late king's body. I take it you have been briefed as to your duties this morning?' He didn't envy them their task. He knew they would have a dreadful hour of preparation under the most arduous conditions.

'Yes My Lord. His Grace, the Archbishop has spoken with me on the matter. I am cognizant of our duties of the task this hour. Rest assured, sire. The women will see to it that everything will be ready for the interment in the abbey when the time comes. The chamber maids will make the bedchamber clean and fresh for the new king, sire.'

'Good. Then go about your business, then see that your ladies are rested.'

Harold took leave to walk, briskly toward the Great Hall, when he noticed Wulfnoth standing by the large oak door, waiting for him. Harold smiled confidently, for he knew the youngest of his brothers would, this night, complete his education. Harold knew the real test of his leadership was just beginning. 'Management,' he mumbled, 'is one thing; kingship is quite another.'

He gazed briefly at his brother and wondered if he should send him to Constantinople. There Wulfnoth and his questions would be out of his hair. Wulfnoth moved closer to him, keeping in mind his earlier order, so that he might learn what the process would involve when the witan met in a full Gemot.

'What will happen now, Harold?' asked the young man cheerfully.

'This is not a game, Wulfnoth! What we have before us is a serious situation.'

Harold then tempered his tone. 'Just listen closely to the deliberation and you will learn how the witan works. Your induction into the adult world starts here, my boy. While inside, you say not one word. I want to make that abundantly clear. If you interrupt, you will feel my wrath. Is that fully understood?'

For a moment, Harold's sharpness unnerved his youngest brother.

'Yes, of course, Harold. Before we enter, I have to ask you something. I don't understand why these claims to the throne came about. Would you explain to me why foreigners want to be king, and not a Saxon?' Wulfnoth looked eager for an answer to his ill-timed questions.

Harold's eyes narrowed and took in a deep breath; he was not amused.

'This is not the time, Wulfnoth!' he snapped, but then reconsidered, and decided to put the boy out of his misery.

They stood behind the large oak door that led to the Great Hall. Harold was a patient man and thoughtful of the story he was about to tell. He took in another a deep breath, and tried to explain the situation as best he could, leaving out much, as time was short.

'You have the time it takes to walk once around the yard, so I will try to be brief; for there's not much time to tell the full story.'

The two men walked out to the courtyard and Harold began Wulfnoth's swift education.

'Well, Edward had been brought from Normandy on the death of King Harthacnut, who, it was suspected, was poisoned. Harthacnut had already made Edward joint ruler for reasons I will explain another time. Suffice to say, it was prudent to have Edward by his side; as he was so hated in England. He had no option if he was to keep the throne, unless Edward, who was English by birth, could pacify the clergy. Harthacnut did not last long. Even at his coronation, he had had to leave to have a couple of whores in his bed. He he was forcibly brought back to the coronation banquet. Right from the start, his attitude was not exactly seemly. Our father might have had a hand in the king's death, and I guess that if he did, he had good cause; the king was a young upstart. Harthacnut had a brother, Magnus, who was king in Norway. He was to take the throne, but never came to claim it due to wars in his own country. The witan offered the crown fully to the next in line, Edward. He was the son of King Æthelred-II and Queen Emma; she became King Cnut's second wife. Emma took the baby Edward to the Norman court; fearing if they had stayed in England, she and Edward would be slain in some political English plot. Edmund Ironside's children were Alfred and Edward. Alfred was sent to Hungary to be raised up in the court of King Yaroslav for safety when he was still young.' Harold ceased; he was becoming irritated. 'Look, Wulfnoth, because this account really is a bit involved, I'll need some time with you alone. There's far too much going on here this morning to think clearly at the moment. Do you mind if I finish the chronicle at some other, more appropriate time? As an aside, didn't your tutors teach you anything of our past?' he asked, in an exasperated tone.

'I'm sorry, Harold. Of course they did. I didn't expect a full account, just the bare bones. That way I can see what is going on in court and understand the decisions being made.' Harold understood and smiled at him.

They made their way back to the Great Hall, and Harold motioned Wulfnoth to open the door. They entered the Great Hall to a great multitude of Saxon lords, where the witan and their attendants awaited them.

The noise was deafening, causing Harold to raise his voice.

'If you promise not to make a nuisance of yourself with your questions, I'll find the time for you, but now I need to see just what is being prepared.'

Harold caught sight of the one person he did not need to see just then.

'Oh dear,' he mumbled, 'here comes Edith Swanneck. I could have done without her presence right now, Wulfnoth. I had better hide away somewhere before she gives me hell- too late she has spotted me. Shit!'

Edith Swanneck moved slowly through the crowd of people and sought out her man. Harold gazed at her from behind a pillar and saw her draw near.

She was approaching forty years and Harold loved her dearly, but had his problems with her. She sported a fine figure that he thought was good for a woman who'd born him seven children, and she was still well proportioned. He loved the way her light brown hair fell when not tied, with a little grey at the temples. Her hair arranged into a bun at the back; the rest descended into two long plaits that fell to her waist. Her eyes resembled deep brown pools that made him melt whenever he gazed into them. Edith looked after her skin and her complexion was that of a young girl. He felt that after her eyes and breasts, it

was her most attractive physical feature. He took her by the arm, looked about, searching for a place for them to talk in private.

'Come with me. There is little time to talk.' he said, as he led her away down a short corridor to a room where they could be alone. 'Edith, my love, what are you doing here? We have serious business to attend to, so this visit had better be important.' he said with an air of impatience.

'Oh, Harold, I have heard the news from Oswald. The king is dead, and it was from his lips, that you are to be the next king. There is also talk of the witan ratifying Edward's words. Is this true? Please, Harold, tell me it's not.' she begged with pleading eyes with an almost resigned look. She wanted desperately to hear him say he was not to become king.

He took her face with one hand and gently felt her smooth cheek with the back of his fingers, tracing the contours of the face of the woman he loved.

'Edith, my sweet love, this is no place for you. You should be with our children. This is men's work. Affairs of state come first.' Irritated, his tone changed. 'Edith, I order you to leave at once or be confined. Is that clear?' The starkness of his words shook her. She frowned and pulled herself away.

'If you think the man I love, the father of our children, who is to be the next king of England is going to deny me my right to see him crowned, and then you'd better think again, Harold Godwinson!' She stammered for a moment. 'I knew this would happen. I just knew it. - Why us? Now our children will be in mortal danger. You bastard Harold!' she cried.

'You're being irrational, Edith. You and the children will have safe passage to Ireland. You will stay with my good friend and ally, Diarmait Mac Mael-na-Mbo, the king of Leinster. He'll look after you. Gunnhild and Gytha will be safe until we have secured stability here in England. He is a good man, he will see they are safe, no matter the consequences here. The arranged passage is finalised. The older boys will go to Wales, where they will be out of harm's way.' he said reassuringly.

He saw her tears well once more and she began to weep. Harold placed his arms gently around her, wiping her tears with a linen cloth. He had always had a hard time coping with her emotional swings.

'Here, don't get upset, Edith. In any case, it has not yet been decided who is to become king. There are other claimants to the throne, not least Harald Hardrada and Svein Estrithson. More than that, that greedy, baby-eating bastard, Duke William of Normandy has seen fit to poke his nose into our affairs these last few months too!' He spat on the floor in utter disgust at the mere thought of William, the cruellest person before the devil, himself.

'Yes, I know, and this frightens me so much. If it weren't for you, Harold-' Harold stopped her in her tracks.

'Edith, go to my bedchamber and be comfortable. My servants will see to your needs, but please keep your head down. I don't need complications just now, my darling.'

She swung about, her fists clenched.

'I'm always pushed to the back, Harold. I am second bloody best to this God-forsaken country. Second bloody best! You don't even have the decency to marry

me!' She pushed him away, sat on a chair, her hands, and fingers wringing as if they were an imaginary piece of wet clothing.

'Don't be so bloody melodramatic. It's my job. I am a politician and a Statesman. The people will be looking to me to lead, to be pragmatic about dealing with our country's affairs. God alone knew Edward never made any sensible decisions without me. All you can think about is a warm fire and bedroom play. I will try to explain the situation later, but for now I need to see how the wind blows with the witan.'

Edith took a step forward, reaching out for him.

'What's wrong with a quiet life? You are forty-two, not twenty-two, and you are getting slow. One of these days, you are going to get hurt, and when that happens, who will look after our children? Ulf, Godwin, and Edmund are almost men. Magnus and Harold are so young, and in need of your company more than ever. They need a father! Gytha and Gunnhild will be in need of good husbands in the next few years, too. Who is to negotiate dowries and provide for them? War must come to us surely. For God's sake, Harold, retire gracefully. Let other, younger men do the fighting.' She bowed her head. 'I'm sorry, but I only want us to be happy and have a contented life together. I want a quiet old age in retirement from the hassle of all the troubles at court.' she burst into almost uncontrollable tears.

He reached out and held her close to him. He could feel her heart pounding and hear the trepidation in her voice. There was not much in his armoury with which to console her and he chose the only course of action he knew: firmness.

'What is must be, and that's that! Do you want this country once more ruled by foreigners? Is that what you want, Um? If William gets the crown, you and I and the whole country had better look out!' he said, feeling anger welling inside him.

'But what the Ætheling, Edgar? He should be king, surely.'

He noticed the earnest look in her eyes, and saw her lips tremble. He was used to her sheepish look, and her wet, pleading eyes. He understood her desperation to hear the words that would most comfort her, anything to relieve her disillusionment, but he ignored her plea.

'The Ætheling? Well, he's too young, and you know it. Do I have to spell it out to you? We are in crisis. What chance would a boy have of commanding an army, if-and-when the rats come gnawing at the barn door? A king has to command, Edith. If he cannot do that, he will be weak and despised. Commanders will do what they will, and the kingdom will fall to tyranny from within, as well as from without. Do you now understand? Oh, Edith, please go to my chambers, and I will see you later.'

Exasperation to hold, but this was not the time for argument. He tried his best to keep his composure. She nodded, kissed him gently on the lips, and with her head bowed, used her sleeve to wipe her wet, reddened eyes. She turned about and walked slowly through the doorway and out of sight.

He felt sorry for her. He sorely put upon her feelings, neglecting her often for affairs of state. The bloody lame excuses the king put forward to stop us marrying, he thought, but now I can, I can't. Bah! In Rome, the Pope will never

accept her. In any event, we were never, officially wed. She is my common law wife of relative low birth. If I'd married her when I was young, then, perhaps, there wouldn't have been a problem. He recalled his own education. More often than not, official wives were just that, nothing more: tools when alliances for future use when expediency called for it.

He and Edith had been lovers from their youth. She tattooed a lover's heart on his buttocks, the only tattoo he had. He allowed her to do it because he loved her. He strolled back to the Great Hall thinking upon his love mark. His father had told him it was the custom to do such things. Many men carried on the practice throughout their lives, often covering large parts of their bodies as a sign of their warrior lifestyle. Men do the oddest things to each other, he mused.

The palace, now full of thegns and earls, all trying to make sense of what the king's death would do to the political structure of England now that there was no adult heir to take the throne. Only they, the members of the witan in a full Gemot, could decide England's fate.

Guthfrid-the-Monk, the official court officer and scribe, approached Harold.

'The witan awaits, My Lord.' Guthfrid said sliding his arms under his habit, then moved aside to wait further orders.

'Thank you, Guthfrid, I will be along presently.'

Harold continued down the corridor that led to the Great Hall.

He entered the Great Hall to tumultuous cheering and thumping of tables.

Whistling and whoops from the assembled witan, greeted him.

Harold raised his hands and the witan slowly fell to a deep hush.

He felt for and twisted his long moustache, trying to hide his embarrassment at such a rapturous welcome. Composing himself for a few moments, he began to speak to the magnates amassed below him.

'Gentlemen, we are in mourning, for our king is dead. No matter how you felt about Edward, we must respect his office. As many of you know, my family has been through some hard times in personal conflict with the king. Not least the conflict the king had with my father, Earl Godwin. Nonetheless, we have a crisis on our hands. We have to decide who is to be our next king. Will it be Harald Sigurdsson, known to some of you as Hadrada? Sven Estrithson has a claim, too. Both have distant but fair claims. Some of you have heard a rumour that the bastard, Duke William. I think we all know how we feel about him and his claim. For all of that, I leave the discussion open to you all.'

Many of the assembly spoke all at once, but not a coherent voice singled out from all the chatter and clatter. The revered warrior and sage, Brithnoth, took the floor. With a mighty roar of, 'Enough!' the hall fell silent.

'Harold, what you say is fair. We have the authority to choose our king from whom we wish. We, the witan, ratify decisions as to should hold the crown. We must agree unanimously to whom the crown will pass. We reject any claims, for we are all agreed as to the new king; are we not?' said the great man, looking around the assembled for approval.

'Aye Harold!' called man thegn.

'Aye Harold!' came the repeated cry, to a man. Brithnoth stood firm and gave

Harold the vote.

'All votes favour you, Harold and none against.' He gazed down at Harold, then looked about the men in the Great hall and back at Harold.

'Do you, Harold Godwinson, accept the crown, and agree to be our king? Do you promise to rule with righteousness, to uphold the ancient laws with goodly might, and above all, fairness in the sight of our Lady Mary and our Lord Jesus. Are you prepared to lead us through the hard times we know are ahead?' he asked, looking to Harold for a sign of acceptance.

Harold stood up, studying all those present. He was deeply mindful of the occasion, being careful of his forthcoming words. His eyes met those of Morcar. He nodded his thanks towards the young man and his brother, Edwin.

'Gentlemen, I thank you, but why me?' he asked uncharacteristically.

Brithnoth arose once more, and, looking Harold full in the eyes, replied passionately.

'Because you, Harold, were appointed by Edward, next to rule as our rightful king, who, on his deathbed, witnessed by noble thegns and the clergy, bequeathed his crown to you. The will of a king is inviolable. Again, I repeat, his dying words were witnessed by the clergy and others of these witan, including myself. Harold, you are the only man able to lead and rule, as we, the witan, would expect a good king to do. I ask you once more. Do you accept?'

Harold gazed about the hall, a barely imperceptible anxiousness about him. He motioned Brithnoth to his seat. Again, Harold rose to his full height then walked slowly around the great table shaking the arm of each member of the witan. Collecting his thoughts, he made his way back to the head of the table. There was a charged, electrified silence.

'I feel humbled that you wish me to be your king, for it was never my intention that it should be. We should consider Edgar, the Ætheling. He too has a right to rule. I understand fully that Edgar could not at this stage in his short life, take on the responsibility of this great office. I, therefore, accept - under the condition that it will be only until Edgar comes into full manhood.' Harold looked awkwardly on as the witan erupted into a tumultuous roar of approval with fists banging upon the table for a full three minutes of merriment and cheering, before finally he could calm them down.

'We will now say a prayer for our late King Edward. Good Bishop, Wulfstan, you'll lead the prayer?' Wulfstan stood and led the assembly in prayer for the dead King's soul.

Harold broke the silence.

'Amen. Now, Gentlemen, we have to be about our business. We have to bury Edward in the new Abbey, as I have promised. I feel it expedient to have the coronation later in the day.'

Upon hearing Harold's last words, there was much muttering amongst the multitude. Wulfstan got to his feet, and with his arms in the air called for silence.

'My brothers, we have to bury Edward and see to the business of crowning our new king. Some of you may feel that such haste is indecent. There is no precedent saying we must wait to crown our king. Indeed, as Harold stated, it

would be expedient to do so. Let us rejoice for the soul of Edward and that of Harold, in one voice. We also have to consider those outside influences that may befall our kingdom if we should procrastinate on the matter.' He felt a rug on his robe and noticed Brithnoth wanted to speak.

Brithnoth once more stood and spoke to the assembly.

'Would you all, after what Bishop Wulfstan has just told you, agree in one voice? Consider the argument: we might well have to fight for our country on three fronts. We are dealing with such men that, given the opportunity, would steal our land. If these claimants decide to make an early move, will we not be ready? The country needs our king installed immediately. It is imperative for the safety of this realm. The old king nominated Harold his heir. We have agreed on electing Harold, ratified this verdict and Harold has accepted our decision. You all know Harold. He is a good man. There is no trickery. Why call you together twice, to ride long journeys when we are all here as one body now? After his crowning, we can then return to our families to wait what may come. You all understand the situation we face.' He gazed about the hall. 'Gentlemen, are we agreed?'

Brithnoth implored those present. The men around the table looked at each other and there was nodding consent. Again the great warrior got to his feet, asking for an answer and spoke once more. 'Are we all in one voice?' he asked. Then, at last, the answer was upon them. One by one, each member called out aloud his reply.

'Aye!' With great relief, Brithnoth shook Harold's hands and smiled broadly at his new king. A great weight lifted from Brithnoth's shoulders. England was now safe in the hands of a mighty general with whom the Lord had chosen to lead them.

Brithnoth's voice boomed around the hall.

'You should all assemble at the new abbey by cock-crow in the morning. Go now, and rejoice. Let God take care of the soul of Edward. Gentlemen, this Gemot is now terminated.' One-by-one the attendants rose and each departed to their lodgings.

From a niche above the great hall, Ethelfrith stood watching the proceedings with her companion, Saethryd.

'We must inform Eumer and the monk, Charles, at once.' Ethelfrith whispered. 'Duke William must be told what has happened this night. Quickly Saethryd, we must away to do our duty. We must send a message to Mary at once, and thus, she will send a courier across the sea to Normandy.'

'Does it make any difference, Ethelfrith? Eumer is to attempt to kill Harold tonight. We should wait until he has accomplished his assassination. Then we can inform Mary to send her message to the duke that Harold is dead.'

'No, Saethryd, we must send our message right away. If Eumer again fails to kill Harold, what should we do then? Either way we must inform Charles of the situation. He will decide. We must hurry to the bell tower where Eumer is hiding and inform him of where Harold will be in the morning.'

'There is no need,' Charles said as he moved from the shadows. 'I've been

close by. It would seem that England has a new king.'

'Charles! You gave us a fright. Don't ever do that again.' Ethelfrith said with a gasp.

'The message has already been sent, my dears. We cannot rely on Eumer. He might make yet another mess of the mission he was given to undertake. I doubt the duke will pay him his due, even if he does accomplish his night's task. By his bungled attempt and foolhardiness he has made himself known. The Saxons would soon tear out from him the information as to who is Eumer's paymaster. You ought to know that Swein Godwinson has men posted everywhere. I doubt Eumer would never be allowed to get a shot in Harold's direction. Go and see Eumer, if you like. Personally, I don't like him. He makes my skin crawl. You must remember one thing. If it comes to the attention of the witan that Duke William is involved, then he will never be able to become king in England. The pope and other magnates would never allow him the privilege to reign here.'

'We understand, Charles. Now, if you will excuse us, we will be on our way.' Saethryd replied. The women then made their way out of the great hall's landing into the darkness and headed for the bell tower.

Swein sat in the kitchen with Gyrth, eating a boiled fish with peas. He pulled at the bread and placed the fish between two crusts when Gyrth spoke.

'I'm nervous, Swein, very nervous. I've made it known to you that I do not like killing women. However, I agree as there is no other alternative. Nonetheless, it still turns my stomach to think about what we are about to do.'

'Think of it as a service to your country.' Swein replied, nonchalantly. 'Like gutting fish so that the people might be fed, that sort of thing. We have been through all this. In any event, we will have rid the kingdom of two dangerous spies.' he replied, with half a mouth full of food.

Gyrth withdrew his scramseax and began to sharpen it with a hand stone he kept in his utility bag on his belt.

'Tell me something. How does the chain of command come from William to us?'

'There are runners that sail back and forth to Normandy. When detected, the Norman spies I replace with my own men. We always know what information passed along, and that the line is never broken. The chain starts with a monk known, laughingly, to you as Charles-the-hairy.'

'What! You mean the bald-headed fellow that used to take confession from the king?'

'Yup, little brother, the very same. As I was saying- he passes on the information to a woman called Mary, who runs an inn near the coast. She has men who run her little errands for her. This is where I have slotted in my men. We discovered the link quite by accident, when a drunken messenger tried his luck with one of the king's maids. She came to see me, and she told us about this man. We showed him how to tell us what was going on. All good stuff, eh.' Swein said, with a grin.

'How long ago was it that all this came about?'

'It must be five or six years ago.' Swein replied rubbing his hands. He rose to his feet to brush off the crumbs. 'Well, are you ready for some country

saving exercise, Gyrth?'

In the shadows of the bell tower corridor stood two women and a man. The Ladies Ethelfrith and Saethryd were talking in whispers with the assassin, Eumer, when they heard the sound of footsteps.

'There's someone approaching, Eumer. Hide yourself, quickly. Saethryd, kiss me full on the mouth, and make it a very passionate kiss.' Ethelfrith said as she clasped Saethryd.

Two men approached, the taller of them, Swein, spoke first, his voice soft and gentle. He motioned to Gyrth to move to position himself behind Ethelfrith while he gazed into the moonlit face of Saethryd.

'I see you are sharing intimacy, ladies.' Swein said sarcastically, noticing their feigned surprise, plainly obvious as they gazed back at their unexpected visitors.

'You take care to see we are alone often, Swein. Gyrth, you look pensive. What is with you this lamentable night?' Ethelfrith replied. Her gaze held a confused look. She wondered if the brothers wished to use them for their sexual gratification, and was willing to appease their desires.

Gyrth knew this killing had to be completed, his personal feelings for this sickening business now put aside.

'Your lord and master must pay you well, does he not?' His tone had become rough, sharp, and low-pitched. He felt his heart thumping, and he could hear the blood rushing in his ears. The killing of these two women was to be now or never.

'He does, my lord.' Saethryd replied looking perplexed at the question.

The brothers stepped forward, each toward their chosen female. Swein walked around to Ethelfrith's back, placing one hand on her shoulder. She turned around. The two women were now-back-to-back, each looking at the man before her.

'Your master will, no doubt, be mindful of your loss to him.' Gyrth said coldly as his razor-sharp scramseax sliced into the gut of Saethryd. Simultaneously, Swein pushed his blade into Ethelfrith. Both females' faces looked in shocked and painful horror into the eyes of their dispatchers. As they collapsed, their life-fluid gushed from under their clothing. Hot, sticky blood, pumping, flooding the corridor mingled with the last choking moans of two contemptible spies. No more would they take the coin of William, Duke of Normandy.

Swein detected movement. In the moonlight, the glint of a steel blade triggered an instant reaction. His arm reached out to pull a shadowy figure from behind a pillar, and with one swift and decisive action, a man dropped to the floor gurgling and coughing. Swein's scramseax had severed the throat of the assassin, Eumer. The man shuddered violently, then fell still, his blood no longer pumping its life-giving qualities to a man so deserving of death.

Gyrth stood motionless, stunned by what he had just witnessed, his chin dropped. He turned to look at his brother, and stuttered.

'M-m-m- my God-he was going to kill you!'

Swein bent down to look at the face of the man whose life he had just taken.

He seemed to recognize the face, but from where, he could not recall.

'I know this man, Swein. His name was Eumer, and he was with Cecil the monk's entourage.'

Swein bent down to take a closer look at the face. The clouds moved on, and full moonlight gave him a clear, unobstructed look at the man. He noticed the man's hose and feet had bloodstains. Swein stood upright and took a kick at the cadaver's face. Alive or dead, he did not much care.

'Swein, what the hell do you think you're doing? For the love of Mary, the man is dead!' Swein swung himself around to face his brother, the anger clearly showing upon his face.

'This is the bastard who murdered Osfrid. What's more, he's the man who tried to kill Harold.' Swein pointed to the congealed blood on Eumer's hose and feet.

Gyrth bent down, looked closely, and saw clearly that the blood was, indeed, as Swein had said. It was copious, congealed and was old, but no more than a few hours.

'Gyrth, take the woman's gold and jewellery. We will throw everything into the river. This killing must look as if it were by robbers. Nothing of theirs shall found on our persons. We must wash our blades, too.'

Gyrth shook his head and held tightly onto Swein's arm.

'No, Swein! I have a better idea. That bastard over there has solved all our problems for us. He killed the women. We killed him after we caught him robbing them. It is much simpler that way. What's more, we have found Osfrid's killer, too. I will see that Harold knows what has occurred here. Leave the details to me.' Swein nodded his agreement and smiled.

'You've a good head upon you, Gyrth. I think that it's safe to assume that we can have the guards come and take this meat away. I am sure that Harold will temper his sadness with the knowledge that we have the killer of Osfrid, and his own attempted assassin, too. Come on; we have much work to do. We had to do what we had to do, and that's the end of it, Gyrth. Don't forget that.'

'Yes, I know, but I really have to be ready to kill. In battle, you are in a frame of mind to do such things. I pray I never have to do this again.'

'Sometimes, Gyrth, there's no other way or course of action. To take the lives of others in such a way as we have done this morning is not to my liking, either. These women would have seen our land overrun with a foreign lord and our people put to slavery. They had no qualms about our feelings, beloved brother. Their death is justified, of that I have no doubt. As for that bastard lying down there, well, I learned a lesson. He was coming back for another try. He must have been paid very well.' Swein bent down and collected the jewelled belongings of the females, then placed them inside Eumer's jerkin.

'Once more, you've shown great courage and justification, Swein. I will always be mindful that your heart and love for your country are uppermost. What you have done is out of love for all Saxons of this nation. A murderer is not what you are. You are a good man. You can sleep peacefully in your bed, knowing that your actions are that of a loyal servant of England.'

As they entered the quarters of the palace guards, Swein gave the guards orders to collect bodies from the tower. The body of Eumer brought to the

stables, ready for Harold to see and for Fredrick to identify.

'Gyrth, like you, I need to rest a while. Later on this morning, we've to attend Edward's funeral. I shall first go to see Brithnoth and inform him of our discovery. Sleep well, my brother.'

'You, too, Swein.'

The brothers moved off in opposite directions, Gyrth to sleep, and Swein to inform the aged warrior, Brithnoth, of their adventure.

Wulfnoth stood beside Harold. For a moment, he hesitated. 'Are you going to allow Tostig to stay?'

'If Tostig can demonstrate to me that he can behave himself, I will reconsider. Look, Wulfnoth, Tostig is foolish beyond belief. He can't keep his private parts inside his leggings. He upsets everyone he deals with and never listens to reason. You saw how he reacted while he was in the king's bedchamber.'

'Oh, I see.' Wulfnoth replied.

Harold noticed his brother's disappointment. Harold's eyes narrowed, as he gripped, tightly, his little brother's arm.

'So, if you behave, like Tostig, you may find yourself in exile, too. You are a good boy; well educated. You have a fresh mind and values of which our father would be proud. Now, if you don't mind, Wulfnoth, I'm off to my bed. I will see you in the morning. Oh, I almost forgot, you'd better, at first light, go with the guards, and release Tostig from his incarceration. After the coronation, I want him escorted to Dover. Is that clear, Wulfnoth? Don't you dare cross swords with me, Wulfnoth? If you do, you will join Tostig exile. For now, I need to sleep, and it's been an exhausting night.'

'Yes, Harold, I understand. I wish for you a good night's sleep.'

Harold was feeling jaded and retired to his bedchamber.

Edith Swanneck, dressed in her heavily embroidered nightgown, had been listening to the meeting from a location hidden from view. As she heard Harold approach she slid back into bed and awaited him. Harold entered the bedchamber to find Edith looking longingly at him.

'You will be king tomorrow. She said resignedly. Tell me. How do you feel, my beloved?'

'I understand you've been listening in to the witan's Gemot, Edith.' he said, with a mild tone of irritation in his voice. He sat on the side of the bed and stroked her hair, admiring its sheen in the candlelight.

Edith rose from the bed and closed the shutters in the leaded glass window niche.

'Yes, of course, what woman wouldn't when she senses her man is about to become king?' She moved to the bed and dropped her gown, unveiling her beautiful full breasts and lithe body. She stood still for a moment, eager for his look, then slipped into bed, fanning her hair on the pillow provocatively. Harold undressed, and sliding between the covers, felt the warmth of Edith's nakedness against his own, snuggled his body against hers, and felt her lips gently kissing his cheek.

'Your pleasure, my king?' Edith's finger glided gently over her man's muscular body.

'You know, I should tan your hide for your insolence, woman.' Tired as he was, he could never resist the temptation of Edith's passionate embrace and lovemaking, until at last they both fell, exhausted, into a deep sleep.

The monks struck the bells of London's Westminster Abbey to signal the hour of three. By the light of candles and torches, four men began to take up the stones under the high altar. The abbey's monks watched them as they worked through the cold night.

'I don't like this one bit, Edmund, I really don't. It is not natural. I mean, our old king is dead, and Earl Harold wants to have his coronation the same day as we put Edward into God's earth. It's just not right, I tell you.' Giso said as he readjusted his linen tunic and pulled his woollen scarf a little tighter to help keep out the night's chilly air.

'Just get on with your job, Giso. We are just told what to do. The new king can do what he likes. In any case, the archbishop ordered this job done now. Don't ask me why this should be the case, but they must have their reasons, and it's not for men like us to ask. You tell him, Guthorn. You're the one with the brains around here.'

Guthorn scratched the back of his head and put down his digging pick.

'Well, I was told. And this information goes no further, mark you. There is to be a war with the bastard, Duke William. Now, I don't know the truth of it, but if you ask me, we'll just wait and see. If it is true, then I suggest we all collect our families and clear off to Ireland. I'm told that a good living is to be made there.' He leaned on his pick and wiped his brow.

'Ireland! It's full of Danes. No law-abiding citizen can walk the streets without being attacked and robbed of what little he has, Guthorn. That is what I heard. What have you to say to that, Edmund?'

Edmund dug deeper, trying to keep out of the discussion, preferring to hold his opinion to himself. He never really had one, just his own thoughts on what he heard others say. He looked above him and saw his companions chatting away, leaning idly against digging implements. His annoyance at his co-workers inactivity showed clearly, but felt it better for his silence.

'War or no war, I still say it's not right. In any case, I don't like Earl Harold. He is too quick to jump into the old king's shoes. I think Queen Edith should rule over us. She's a good woman.' Giso remarked with a smug look upon his face.

'Anyway, as much as that, I say we just keep digging until we get this grave deep enough for the old king's corpse. Otherwise, we will be in big trouble with Stigand, do you hear?' Guthorn said, noticing the glare in Edmund's eyes.

'There's nothing wrong with Harold as our new king. He's been good to the shires. He saw to it that Edward had Earl Tostig exiled, and he was his own brother, too. Many would have let Tostig carry on his wicked ways without a care. Harold never overtaxed us, he was always fair about that. No, Harold will make a fine king, I'm sure of that.'

Giso looked at Guthorn, then raising his hand, and with his finger pointing menacingly, he growled the words he never thought he would ever utter aloud to his comrades.

'I don't like this talk of running away to Ireland, Guthorn. It smells of cowardice, if you ask me. If that bastard, William, comes here, we will stand with our brothers and fight with our king, no matter. We will do it for our king and our country. We will succeed or die together, like men. If the new king is prepared to stand and fight, then so should we, it's as simple as that. It's not our king who will pick a fight, it's them bloody foreigners. This is our land, and it has nothing to do with Normandy.'

'Well, if you two have finished, I want to complete this task and get some bloody sleep. So if you don't mind giving me a moment of your time.'

The men agreed and set to work, feeling sheepish at admonished by Edmund's curt remark.

CHAPTER NINE

Edith Swanneck rose early from her stolen night of passion and hummed to herself as she made her plans for the day. She looked toward the window where a solitary and candle floated on a bowl of water, its light playing with the particles of dust it illuminated, as they floated without a care reflected within its beam. The thin shaft of yellow-white moved slowly across the room, past each object as if counting down the minutes on a sundial clock.

The man she loved slept on, dreaming, sometimes mumbling a few incoherent words lost to his pillow. She smiled lovingly at him, then bent down over the bed and softly kissed his forehead, trying not to wake him.

She had many preparations that morning. After all, she thought, Harold is now free to marry me, and then I'm going to be a Queen. I am going to rule with my man, and Harold will do as he is told. Her daydreams drifted hither and thither. I have so many plans, and so much to do, she mused.

She left the room to go to the dressing room next door where her trunk had been left the night before. She called a maid to dress her in a blue, full-length silken robe, her almost-golden fair hair falling to her waist. She stretched her arms and breathed in deeply. Despite her short sleep, she felt bright and cheerful. She opened the door and walked back out into the corridor, closing the door behind her. She motioned towards the waiting maids to attend her. She felt powerful, as she gave orders to various servants, who really didn't know what to make of her. To the palace chambermaids, Edith was Harold's paramour, a veritable prostitute, yet her bidding that morning, was carried out without question.

She re-entered the bedroom, gently closing the door behind her and walked briskly across the room, then paused to tidy her gown, brushing off the fluff that the bedclothes found so attractive.

Harold stirred, rolled over and snored even louder.

Edith turned to gaze at him lovingly. She blew him a kiss and moved toward the bed to shake gently her sleeping Harold.

'Harold, my love. It's the time to rise. The bishops will be waiting. They'll be sending word very soon that they're ready for you.'

Harold stirred from his slumber, but his eyes still closed.

'Waiting for what?' he asked. His bleary eyes opened, to see Edith sitting beside him. Is she part of my dream? He wasn't sure if this was a continuation of yet another dream or if he was awake. He soon realized that he was conscious and was back in the world of the living.

'You've been dreaming, and, as usual, talking in your sleep.' she said, softly kissing his brow and stroking his hair.

He was not quite fully awake and looked a little bewildered, as if he didn't recognize her.

'What did you dream of, Harold? Do tell me. I wish to share your dream.' she said looking interested, drawing her fingers through his chest hair.

He turned to lean on his elbow, his hand supporting his head, looking thoughtful.

'How do I begin? Do I smell flowers lavender?'

'Go on; you were going to tell me about your dream.'

'Oh, yes. Well, err- there was a wall, much taller than this one. It was silver-white with people on it, like a mural, except the picture moved and the people moved within the picture. I could hear the people talking from out of the wall, then I saw you, Stigand, the bastard, and Sigurdsson. And then an odd thing happened. The word Harold the Great appeared on the great wall. I could hear my voice making great decisions as to our country's future. Men appeared wearing strange clothing and offered to help me. They said that with their help, I would win all my battles. They showed me many strange and powerful devices. They were great wizards from God, Edith. Then I awoke, and you were sitting beside me.' He rubbed his eyes and sat upright.

'I have dreams like that, too. They are not quite the same as yours. I once dreamed that I was amongst an enormous crowd. I could see our boys on a huge field running with a large brown egg. They were throwing the egg to one another and running up and down being chased by other men who wanted to hold their legs, trying to trip them as they ran toward two tall posts. They were trying to capture the big, brown egg?' She shrugged, then gazed down at him.

He gave her an odd, perplexed look, rolled his eyes, then grinned like a nine-year-old boy who had just found a gold coin.

'It would be best to keep our dreams to ourselves, Edith. Now, what is it you wanted of me?' he asked, shrugging off her words, and making a halfhearted attempt to get up.

She pushed him back down onto the bed. 'You have to bury Edward, of course. Not long ago I heard the bells toll eight and the daylight is just beginning. I let you sleep a while longer. You were so tired last night, and you wore me out, too, remember?' She kissed his forehead and gently rolled him onto his stomach. He felt obliged to conform. He knew the routine well enough. She rubbed and kneaded his shoulders with the aromatic oils he so loved. Edith's fingers were those of an angel, a temptress par-excellence. She knew her man, and she understood his body as he did hers.

'You know I have to be dressed and ready soon, my love. There is the coronation after we have buried Edward's body. There will be a celebration

banquet after the crowning ceremony too. As much as I enjoy the sweet touch of your hands, I really have to move, wash, dress and eat. What's more, I need to be shaved. I feel awfully undressed without my chin shaved.'

Harold implored her to finish his massage, and he felt her kiss the nape of his neck, her teeth nibbling and tenderly biting his flesh, ignoring his demands.

'Ouch! That hurt! How many times have I told you not to bite my ear, woman? You know I don't like it.' he said, tersely. 'That is why I do it to you. It keeps you alive and alert, and makes your blood run. You're my man, Harold Godwinson. I will do with you what I like and when I like.' she said, then smacked his buttock, then jumped backward away from his searching arms.

'Bloody hell! That smack hurt! Do you have to play like that? Where are my robes?'

She pointed at a chair that had Harold's clothes draped over it, ready.

'They're all there for you. I had the boys bring them here while you slept. The pages put the crowning robes in the king's wardrobe for you, too. I have decided that as you are, with the exception of the crowning, the new monarch of this realm, you may as well get used to dressing as a king. The attendants will dress you now. All that dressing for yourself is finished. My man is king and will be treated as such. Ooh, I'm so excited!' She said girlishly as she strolled across to look out of the window to see and hear the various goings-on in the courtyard below. Her exuberance clearly spilling into the room as she twirled about and sang a sweet tune to herself.

'So, I now have to walk all that way down the corridor to get dressed?'

'Don't be silly, Harold, we'll sleep in Edward's old bedchamber you're king now. I have organized everything. You see, I have my uses, you adorable man.' Harold interrupted her.

'Will you please stop reminding me that I'm now king. It's getting on my nerves.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I must admit it's a nice bed. King Cnut had it made for him and Queen Emma. It has always caught my eye on the rare occasions when I have been in the king's bedchamber. I will have a new mattress made for it, though. I couldn't bear the thought of Edward dying on that old mattress. I'm sure it's still the original one made for the bed.'

Edith sat in a comfortable chair, took off her lambskin slippers, and massaged her feet.

'I understood that you were in a hurry to get dressed, Harold. I need to get dressed, in royal robes, too. I have decided to use this as my dressing room from now on. The ladies can use the ante-chamber for their purposes, and we can have a connecting door fitted.' Harold's facial expression changed dramatically to one of exasperation and near despair.

'Edith! The king's body is not yet cold. My sister is hardly a widow of six hours, and you are talking as though you are queen of England! You will get a grip on yourself and on reality, woman! We may have seven children, and we might have been together for more years than I can count, but don't you

understand that you cannot become Queen of England?

'I don't see why not, Harold?' She looked puzzled. He had promised her the known world, and now she was becoming more than suspicious of his motives.

Harold rose to his feet and took a stance. He raised his arm with a finger pointed at her. He dropped his hand behind his back, his frustration with her evident. He looked down at his feet that were poking from under his shirt and he felt sill.

'Look. You obviously don't understand. Now that I have become the King of England, I have to sustain my position. I have to have the blessing of the Pope, the people, and the magnates of this land, and the rulers of other countries, too, if it comes to that. I rule with their consent. In order that I keep England safe from the wolves that would have me off this throne, I may have to make alliances with other states. I will need to protect our trading routes, thus keeping the country economically buoyant. To protect that state, I may have to take a wife from some foreign country. The people expect me to produce a legitimate heir to carry on when I die, thus securing any alliance with a bloodline. I have to keep peace in this land, Edith. I doubt the Pope would allow you and me to marry now that I'm king. So just remember that.' He stood staring at her face, not knowing if she had taken in what he had told her.

Edith threw down her slipper, then she stood taller than normal; a fierce, burning look aimed straight at him. The look took Harold by surprise. He saw her temper was boiling over, and saw her face scowl. Harold knew very well this look. He went to speak, to calm her. With her hands placed firmly on her hips, she leaned menacingly forward, as if steaming smoke and fire from her lips. She stopped him. Harold's chin dropped to the floor. He knew that the moment had come when the sun would fall from the sky.

'So, you're planning to sleep with another woman. You Bastard!'

'No Edith. It's not like that.' He turned to look out the window. Bollocks! Now what do I do? He thought. He gazed through the glazed portal, his mind working overtime.

'Yes, it is. You just said so! Don't you turn your back on me, Harold Godwinson! We have a family to consider. You told me you would always be faithful. You promised always to be my man. Now that you're fucking king, you're going to cast me out! Just so you can bed some foreign fucking whore! You bastard, Harold!' He turned to face her. The light from the window eclipsed by his figure shone like a beacon of fire around him when open irritation gripped him.

'You will keep your tongue in its place, woman!' He shouted throwing off his night attire, and in silence, began to dress. He gazed at her, and the pathetic appearance of this once proud woman alarmed him. Edith stood shaking with uncontrollable anger burning her every being, turning here and there, walking about the room; her hopes dashed. She halted and stared at him, her eyes reddened and swollen. She grimaced.

'I'm not good enough for you, um? Want another woman, do you? Just you wait, Harold Godwinson.' she said cursing through her teeth. 'I'll make you regret this. Just you wait and see.'

'Edith! For the sake of Heaven, get a grip on your emotions, woman! At some point, I have to produce a legitimate heir. It's not likely that I will enjoy having some other woman in my bed, now, is it? You know I would rather be with you- the woman I love! Put yourself in my position. If I were in your shoes, I would hate knowing someone was taking my man, let alone her having a child by him. It is only natural to feel that way, but the country is much greater than our personal emotions or desires. Those duties must always come first. We are but tools used for the stability of our people, and our country. I will have to grin and bear it, just as you will, and that's the end of the matter.'

'I suppose that you were fucking all the women in Normandy when you were away for nearly a year, too. Come and have a fuck, Harold. I have some lovely girls here for you to choose from. Is that what the bastard offered you? You fornicating bastard!' She threw a stool across the room, and one of stool's legs broke off, hitting him, as it crashed against the wall beside him. Edith seated herself on the side of the bed, weeping.

'What? Do you know what I had to go through to get back to England after my ship wrecked off the coast of Ponthieu? Let me tell you, Swanneck. I had to suck up to that bastard, William. Well yes, I bloody well had to suck up to him. Abandoned; I was left to rot in one of Guy Ponthieu's jails. I had our son, Håkon, and my brother, Wulfnoth with me, too. They too were taken as hostages. Do you know how that feels, Edith, eh?' Harold paced back and forth about the room, his arms behind his back, looking at her, then turning his gaze away from her. Edith sat, gazing blankly at the door.

'I can guess, Harold.' she said, then stood up wringing her hands, nervously, and turned to gaze blankly at the wall, sulking, trying desperately to find a counter to Harold's arguments. He crossed the room towards her, reached out and grasped her arm, turning her about. He was beginning to boil at her selfishness. It took all of his willpower to control his slipping temper.

'You stupid, shallow woman, you have no idea! When the Normans discovered who I was, I had to leave the boys behind as hostages. I had to run around with him in his sacred bloody Normandy, killing innocent people so he could keep his downtrodden population under his control. And then I had the added humiliation of making oaths and fealty to him. These, I may add, made under duress. Do you understand what that does to a man, um? Why is that? You may ask. Well, so I could get the boys released, and get us back to the safety of England. These people are the sorts of I will have to deal with. Now do you understand?'

She shook off his grip and strode away from him, looking sheepish. She turned to look out of the window, avoiding his gaze. He approached her from behind, hesitated for a moment, and then put his arm around her to embrace and comfort her. Once more, she shook off his touch.

'Edith, I love you more than you could ever in this world imagine. I want us to be together, always. You should know that by now. Forced I have been into a situation that is far bigger than both of our desires. The love that we have for each other must be tempered with... Oh, Edith. I'm not allowed to be selfish with my love of you. It is my greatest wish that you are by other princes allowed to be with me. If I could have you by my side, to marry and have you as

my queen, all would be well. I don't have any say in the matter. If I married you, many thousands in this country would die because of our selfishness.'

His pleading eyes welled as he followed her movements. I have failed, he thought. She's not heard a word I've said. What else can I do? Surely, she knows we can be together as we are now, only not officially, that's all. He looked longingly toward her. He moved once more to comfort his woman.

Edith walked away, throwing her remaining slipper contemptuously to the floor. The mere thought that the man she loved would even contemplate sleeping with another woman disgusted her. They had always been faithful to one another. Her heart was broken, her dreams quashed, and the world would no longer be her oyster. He reached out an arm, but again Edith turned away.

'Don't come near me, Harold! You are no better than Swein or Tostig. The whole Godwinson family is made up of nothing but womanisers!' She remained silent for a moment. Her nostrils caught the odour food cooking from the kitchen nearby. I will never eat again, she thought. Her disappointment total. She felt pushed away, shut out, discarded and superfluous. She wanted to hit him, to hurt him as he had hurt her. England can go hang, for all I care. England is not a person with feelings and emotions, she thought. 'You Bastard, Harold!'

From the door behind him, there came a gentle knocking. Harold turned to look at the door as if someone was about to walk through it.

'Yes, what is it?' he called out.

'Your breakfast, sir, and archbishop, Stigand, wishes to speak with you, also.'

'Tell the Archbishop that I will be with him in a short while, Cedric. Go and make him comfortable.' He looked once more at Edith, determined to make his point understood. He knew he was fighting a losing battle, but he had to try, just once more.

'You see, my life is no longer my own. I now belong to the State. Come along, Edith. We can work through this. You know what we will soon face from these greedy foreigners. You know I have to do what needs to be done.' He noticed her face begin to grimace angrily.

'Oh, go to hell!' She made her way briskly towards the door, collecting her shoes as she made her exit. Her face flushed with the boiling rage inside her. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips pursed. Moments later, the heavy oak door slammed shut behind her. There was now silence but for the receding echo of the door slamming.

Harold sat upon the bed, feeling miserable, where, not a few hours before, he had been happy with the woman he loved. He knew he had to see the archbishop, but he didn't feel like it. He opened the door and smiled at Cedric.

'Summon the pages, Cedric. I need to dress appropriately.' then made his way toward the old king's wardrobe to make ready for the coming hours.

His dressing finished, and followed by an entourage of pageboys, he ambled toward the Great Hall where he met Stigand waiting outside the oak door, and was, as usual, leaning against the wood panelling, crosier in his hand, and one foot rose slightly off the floor. Harold looked pale and morose and thinking of the day ahead, then clicked up a gear. This, too, will pass. It will be all right

with Edith soon enough, he thought. He smiled at the ageing Stigand, and held out his hand toward him.

'Ah, Stigand, we have a fine day for the interment of our late king, do we not?' He lightly tapped his friend upon his shoulder, taking care not to touch the old man's foot with his own. He gazed down at Stigand's wrapped toes and shook his head a little. 'You need to get that seen to, or they'll be cutting it off.'

Stigand ignored the humour. 'Indeed, My Lord.' he said mindful that Harold was now king. 'We've been waiting a little while for you. Have you not eaten?' A shaft of bright light illuminated his gold and silver staff, and shone on the silver-threaded robes giving the bent primate the appearance of a fallen angel.

'No, I've had no time, really. I've just had one hell of a row with Edith, and she's very upset. She has got it into her head that she we will marry and will be my queen. I've had to set her straight on the matter.' He shook his head and nodded towards the pageboy who and then opened the door.

'She is a good woman and mother, Harold, but has no training in the art of court procedure, etiquette, or international diplomacy. What else can you expect of her? She will have to learn to accept her place, and that is all there is to it. I know you deeply love her, but you chose this path, and she needs to understand. She had been to speak with me some weeks before on the matter of a proper marriage with you.

'I tried to explain. I really did, but you're dealing with a woman, one who has her own ideas as to what should and should not take place at court. She had a fit when I told her that I might have to marry from out of the country to provide an heir. That really went down well, I can tell you.' he said with a deep sigh. Stigand moved to sit on a bench, his gout-ridden toes making their presence felt as he grimaced in painful contemplation of the day ahead.

'I can well imagine her feelings. You have been together so long-you're peas together in a pod. What did you expect? Come, Harold, let's get our stomachs filled.'

They moved to a side room, where Cedric waited on the two men while kitchen maids brought a breakfast of fish. Harold chewed on his buttered bread, cheese, and an apple, while Stigand munched through more than his fair share of fish. He looked deeply into Stigand's eyes. Oh, Stigand, he thought, why is it that you are sometimes so foolish? Do you ever consider and think things over before you speak? You and I have never spoken about God. I sometimes wonder if you really believe in God at all. I sometimes feel he is selfish to the core. I know that deep down he is a good man. Just be truthful and faithful for me. Can I ask more of this old man? he asked of himself.

'So, tell me, Stigand. What's been done with regard to the burial of Edward?' Stigand looked confident.

'The grave was dug during the night. It's before the high altar, but we'll have to wait a while before the stone can be inscribed.'

'I'll leave the wording to you, Stigand. Something simple will suffice for now. Is it too much of a rush to organize?' he asked watching Stigand fill his mouth with yet more fish. Stigand leaned over toward his new king, and with his

fingers pulling down the lower skin under his eyes, showed the redness of his bloodshot orbs.

'Harold, look at my eyes. Do these look like the eyes of someone that has had much sleep these last few days? I have organized the ceremony, just as you asked. Abbot Edwin will officiate at the funeral. We will place Edwards body in the grave, and with due deference, throw in a few trinkets, the purple state robe, and then we'll have your coronation in the afternoon. How does that sound?'

'What have you organized with regard to the coronation?'

'Archbishop Ealdred will officiate at the coronation; nothing has been left to chance. It's not a good idea for me to crown you. As you know, I received my pallium from Pope Benedict-X. If you recall, he was stricken from the official pontifical records eight years ago. We don't want any comebacks in the future, that is. If I were to officiate, your enemies might accuse you of not being properly crowned. Ealdred and I have it all worked out; you'll be crowned at two after the hour of noon. Prepare yourself for the anointing with holy oils. I should warn you, too, that the anointing will be a messy affair, at least for you.'

Harold looked puzzled. He had never experienced a crowning before, much less heard of it being a messy business.

'Ah, yes, Benedict? That could've complicated the matter. Just one moment, Stigand; what do you mean, by messy?' he enquired giving Stigand a look of utter bewilderment.

'Well, you have to have your hands and feet anointed, and then your chest, head, back, elbows, oh, and,' Stigand gave a forced cough, 'your codlings, too, of course.'

'My codlings?' he asked, gasping in utter disbelief, but soon realized his leg was being pulled, and allowed Stigand go on all the same, playing along with his wicked humour.

'Oh, yes. If your queen is to bring forth legal issue, you must have the holy oil rubbed upon your pizzle too. God's seed blesses the anointed codlings, Harold. And then there is the drinking of the holy goat's piss. The ceremony is not completed until all the rituals have been concluded in full, according to the Holy Scriptures.' he said smiling broadly at the king as he passed him a hot hog's leg from a silver platter.

Harold raised his head and nodded his appreciation for the sweet ham.

'I'm not so sure about the anointing part of the ceremony, but I'll look forward to drinking the holy goat's piss, Stigand. Have you ever tried it? You ought to, you know. It's really quite palatable.' he said, then ate on, smiling.

'I thought you might need to smile, Harold. I wanted to see the look on your face, but as always, there is no catching you out. Come along, we must be at the abbey. We have a funeral to attend, and we can't keep the guest waiting now. He'll start to smell if we procrastinate too long.'

'He smelled bloody awful before he died, let alone what he must smell like now.' he replied with a chuckle, and helped Stigand to his feet.

At the main palace entrance, Harold and Stigand met with Ealdred, the

Archbishop of York. Together they walked slowly out of the palace to be greeted by a crowd of weeping burghers. Abbot Edwin gave the order to bring forth the coffin, then he led the solemn ceremony of the casket's passage from the king's bedchamber through the palace doors.

The Witan and the inhabitants of London followed the abbot behind the coffin in order of rank into the newly consecrated Abbey of Westminster. Outside, the crowd fell silent, but for the sound of weeping and the monk's sorrowful Latin chant as they processed ahead.

As the procession walked slowly forward, Stigand looked up in wonder at the new and beautiful abbey. He felt the pain in his legs and feet beginning to recede, helped by the herbal remedy that his apothecary had given him earlier in that morning, and was grateful that it was at last taking effect. He looked at Harold and could see that he was nervous.

'After Edward's burial, and when we've finished these proceedings, you'll follow me back to the palace. All the State robes and regalia will, by and then, and be ready for ready you to don. All you have to do is follow my whispered instructions.'

'Well, I have never been crowned before, so I guess I had better follow your lead.'

'I'll be by your side at all times, so there will be no chance of any embarrassing moments to foul up the *modus operandi*. Are you nervous, Harold?'

'I'm about to be crowned King of England, and you ask me if I'm nervous! You sometimes ask the dumbest questions, you really do.' Stigand smiled and hobbled on, making the sign of the cross to the crowd as he passed by.

Harold looked up at the abbey that soared way above him, the long nave filled with people awaiting the arrival of the body of their late king. It was dark, with light slipping through the small but plentiful windows, the dust-laden beams of light illuminating those who stood below. The altar, magnificent and resplendent with gold leaf, lit up like a beacon by the shafts of sunlight streaming from narrow windows on either side.

The king's throne placed perfectly and symmetrically in front of the chancel to await the afternoon's enthronement.

In front of the altar, an open grave lay vacant, awaiting the arrival of its regal occupant. Here and there, starlings flew in swooping, then out again as if looking for their king. High above, vast oak beams held up a roof that was so magnificent a monument to God, the crown and its country. Carved angels flew in splendour from their static wooden perches, set to look down upon the congregation below, and light flooded the nave. A few moments later, Harold, Edwin, Ealdred and Stigand entered the abbey. At Stigand's signal, the monks began to chant a lament for Edward's soul, followed by laments sung by the children of court.

Harold and his bishops sat beside the Alter, then the abbey fell quiet. As housecarls lowered Edward's body into the grave, there was a deep sigh from the congregation. All that could be heard was the weeping of Queen Edith and her ladies.

Abbot Edwin gave an account of the life of Edward, recalling his deeds; and

how he had honoured Harold by giving the final edict that he was to be their new king. Bishop Ealdred said the mass, and each attendant took bread and wine. The rushed ceremony was now over, but for the filing of the people round the grave to see Edward for the last time.

Harold and the other dignitaries proceeded slowly out of the abbey into the cold January sunshine. Behind them, the congregation began to file out of the abbey and informed at the door they must return later when the bells rang for the people to be present at their new king's coronation.

Stigand and Ealdred followed Harold into the royal antechamber, where a blazing fire roared and spat, throwing its warmth around the room as if declaring itself the centre of attention. The three men warmed themselves against the cold of the winter's day.

Harold gazed at the flames thoughtfully.

'You really don't know where you go when you die, Stigand. I mean we could have thrown his body in the river for all Edward knew of the proceedings. I think I'll be buried in some form of sarcophagus. I don't like the idea of being buried under the ground. Ah, but what if you weren't dead, just in some deep coma, perhaps. When you recovered you could at least push the lid up and get out. You know, like the nun who hanged herself sometime back. The other nuns were going to throw her body into the river. Well, blow me down with a feather; while they were carrying her body away, she came back to life that was amazing! I'm going to have a bell attached to a cord through a hole in my sarcophagus, just in case.'

'Yes, indeed.' Stigand replied. 'I was witness to this woman's plight. She was to become a nun after she repented of her sins. God works in ways we can only hope someday to understand, Harold.' He sat in a comfortable seat, feeling the warmth of the fire on his feet.

'Well, we're on our own for a while.' Ealdred interjected, looking for permission to leave the king's presence. 'I suggest we take a little meal before your coronation. This last ceremony took exactly an hour, not bad for a bishop of my years. Might I go and see that the preparations for your coronation are at hand, sire?'

Harold thanked Ealdred for his work, and bid him leave to finish his arrangements, then sat by the fireside, smiled and imbibed from a silver goblet a mouthful of his favourite red wine.

'I think the queen will come in to see me very soon. I noticed she entered her quarters without joining us, which I thought was odd, for her.'

'Oh, no, she is seeing her doctor just now. She informed me that she was not in good humour. The stress of the last few days has been more than she is able to bear. She'll be with us later.' he said and promptly fell fast asleep. Harold made himself comfortable, and he too dozed off into a deep slumber.

A few hours later, a knock came at the door, and the pageboy called out that Bishop Ealdred was waiting outside. There was no reply, so the boy opened the door and entered the room.

'My lord,' the boy called, and Harold woke startled. 'Bishop Ealdred is here, sire.'

The Ealdred entered the room and apologized for the boy's intrusion in waking him.

'Are you ready for me, Ealdred?' he enquired as he shook the snoring Stigand from his slumber.

'Very soon, My Lord. The abbey is now quiet, but for the labourers who'd set to work in filling Edward's grave. When I left them, they were struggling with the gravestone, which they're to place over their late king's remains.' Ealdred replied as he looked out of the window to see that the labourers had collected their tools and were making their way out of the abbey.

'I can see a few pilgrims mingling about outside the abbey, but they'll be gone soon, I'm having everyone ushered away while my men finish preparing for your coronation. I've taken care that the nobles, that is, the earls and thegns are seated at the front, with the lesser, common people at the back and outside. We should hear the bells soon, so we'll know when to prepare to leave.

'How long will that be, Ealdred?' Harold asked.

'With respect, you can't rush these things, sire. I've asked that the monks come for you when they're ready to start the preliminary proceedings.'

'In that case, come and enjoy a little wine and a bite to eat. While you're here, I'd like to hear from you what has been going on in the north, these last few months. Also, I'd like your views on one or two matters.' he said offering Ealdred a seat. 'I need to change into my coronation robes while listening. Page's, bring to me the stately robes, and dress me.' he called. More of a request than an order, and the pageboys did as they were asked. While Harold was being dressed, he listened to Ealdred's news, and soon, he was dressed and ready. Together they enjoyed humorous banter, whiling away the time remaining.

Some time later, there came a light knocking at the door. A young pageboy opened the door, and there stood three monks in the corridor ready to accompany Harold, along with the two archbishops, to the abbey.

'How do I look, Stigand?' Harold twirled about, his heavy purple and gold robes bellling out like a tent in the breeze.

'You look just perfect, Harold,' the old man replied, grinning. 'All you have to do now, is stand upright and walk with due dignity to the abbey. Leave the rest to Ealdred and myself, though I'm only helping, of course, not officiating, remember.'

'Can I change my mind about all this, Stigand?'

'If you do, I will kill you with my own bare hands. Now, get out there, and become our anointed king.' he replied, grinning, when he heard the bells toll.

'You know, Stigand, I'd never met such an ungodly person in my life, until I met you.' Harold shook his head, and made his way through the door and into the corridor, followed closely by the archbishop officiate of York.

Harold made his exit from the palace to an exuberant crowd, all cheering for their king elect. He felt heart thumping so strong the throng could see the movement through his robes as the entourage made their way towards the abbey. The deafening gushing of blood in his ears, almost drowning out the crowd's cheering; it was all too surreal. His legs felt weak so that he almost stumbled on the cobbled street.

He stood for a moment looking at the magnificent Abbey of Westminster, not more than one hundred paces away. Once more he slowly crossed the street, soon he felt the abbey steps beneath his feet. Each step felt like a high wall to climb. He felt the nervousness of the occasion as his legs began to shake almost uncontrollably. As he entered the great doors, there was complete silence until he had at last reached the enthronement chair. The abbey doors closed behind him, and the interior fell into semi darkness.

The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York, Ealdred, approached and stood beside the now seated Harold. Ealdred took a few paces forward, and holding his arms out to the crowd, called out.

'Good People of England, I present to you, Harold, our duly appointed king. If there is anyone amongst you who does not wish Harold as your king, let him leave this holy place now, and go in peace to another realm.'

At that moment, the abbey doors flew open, and a mounted and armoured knight rode into the abbey. Harold began to feel decidedly nervous as the man rode towards the high altar, then turned his horse to face the assembled throng of ennobled and low persons alike. He took off his mailed glove, threw it down towards those assembled, and called out in a loud voice that reverberated around the abbey.

'Is there one amongst you who wishes to challenge my liege king's authority to rule this kingdom? Let him who dares come forward, come now, and challenge me to a fight to the death.'

Harold leant forward and tugged upon Stigand's robes.

'Stigand, what the hell is going on here?'

Stigand looked down towards his king, grinned and winked at him.

'Your father did the same thing for King Cnut, and we thought Brithnoth was the right man to carry the challenge for you; it's only fitting, Harold. Ealdred and I thought it would make a nice start to the proceedings.' the old bishop replied grinning broadly at the theatrics, and chuckled softly.

Harold gazed in disbelief at the antics that his primate had asked of Brithnoth.

'Well, it put the fear of God into me; I can tell you. Just get on with the procedures, Stigand. I feel silly enough in this garb as it is, without your tasteless stupidity.' he said, tersely.

Not one person answered the call to challenge the knight. The tall, blond haired rider dismounted and led his steed out of the abbey to cheers from those waiting outside, while Ealdred and Stigand, with arms raised, stepped out in turn, and looked down upon Harold. He smiled sweetly, and turned to face the crowd.

'Do you, the low and common folk, and the noble people alike of this kingdom, trust and implore, Harold, to be your anointed and sovereign king?' In one loud and resounding voice, the throng called out.

'We accept Harold to be our lawful king, under God!'

Ealdred turned to Harold, beckoned him to stand, and he removed the robes of State from Harold's shoulders and bade him to sit upon the throne.

Stigand held the golden ampulla containing the anointing oil in his left

hand. With his right hand, he lifted up Harold's arms. Ealdred took the golden spoon, and taking a little oil from the ampulla, he anointed Harold under his arms, legs, elbows, head, feet and back.

'Ealdred, don't you dare come near my coddles.' he whispered almost inaudibly, with a grin.

Stigand smiled wryly, while Ealdred gazed in confusion at Harold.

Ealdred gave Harold the Orb, and Stigand passed Ealdred the Sword of State to give to the king. Ealdred then collected the crown from its box and placed the crown upon Harold's head. The sweat began to pour from Harold's face, and his hands became clammy. He had waited for this moment. It was the pinnacle of all ambition, yet he felt a tinge of sadness for the woman he loved. Edith Swanneck could not be there by his side. His children were here to see their father crowned, but their mother, where was Edith Swanneck? Where on earth was Edith? Harold thought as he gazed about the abbey. The whole scene was but a dream, like he was looking on as if a bystander.

'God save the King!' Ealdred called to the people.

Harold heard a great shout from those assembled that startled him.

'God save the King!' the loyal people of England replied.

He shivered nervously, his self-consciousness almost overwhelming him. I would rather fight fifty men, unarmed, than go through this again, he thought. He looked to see what Stigand and Ealdred were to do to him next.

Stigand took from the altar the heavy, leather bound and bejewelled Bible and passed it to Ealdred. Its gloriously gold-leafed inlay shone like the sun as the light from the glazed windows fell upon it. Holding the holy book in front of Harold, who placed his hands upon it and in a loud voice that reverberated resoundingly around the abbey, the Ealdred performed his last major role of the ceremony.

'Harold of England, our anointed king, do you promise to keep and uphold the ancient laws of this kingdom? To serve God, protect, and keep the faith of the Holy Church?'

'I promise so to do.' Harold replied unfalteringly.

Ealdred whispered to the king his instructions as to what would come next.

Harold gazed into Ealdred's face, and finally, began to relax.

'Now, you just sit tight, My Lord. You are not done just yet, because you have to accept fealty from each nobleman here. They know what to do and say. When they come to you, just touch their head and reply with, I accept your fealty. That's all there is to it. You rise from your throne. Then proceed outside to meet your people. After that, everyone goes off to enjoy a great feast.'

'And that's the end of the ceremony. I have never been so worried in all my life, Ealdred. You've no idea how stupid I feel sitting here, dressed up like a strutting cockerel.'

Ealdred smiled, and in one dignified movement, bowed low, and then knelled before his king.

Brithnoth, now horseless, brought each noble forward. Each spoke to their new king with the words, I love my lord and king, and give you fealty and promise to

serve my king faithfully unto death. Each man and then strode outside to line the way to the king's palace.

At last, the ceremony was over. Harold, accompanied by Ealdred and Stigand, walked slowly down the nave to the abbey entrance to be greeted by riotous cheers and shouts of God Save the King! from the throng of loyal subjects.

He felt hot and uncomfortable. He just wanted to change out of his cumbersome robes then sleep. He stood at the abbey door when he noticed the unmistakable Edith Swanneck moving towards him from out of the crowd, and he saw a guard stepping forward and stopped her approach, pushing her back into the milling throng. His love about-turned then she walked slowly back towards the palace with tears running down her cheeks.

Queen Edith noticed what had occurred, and on seeing Edith Swanneck walking away, called out to a guard standing near by.

'Guard, bring the Lady Swanneck to me, at once!' She saw that the guard was hesitant for a moment.

'Well, go on and then!' The queen said looking decidedly annoyed, and glared at the man. The queen, her hands upon her hips, watched intently as the man, at last, obeyed her royal command.

'Yes, My Lady!' the guard replied, and rushed off, pushing through the crowd with his lance, calling for space. The guard caught up with the Swanneck and ushered her back to the dowager queen.

Edith Swanneck bowed low,' she said as she raised herself to face the queen.

'Edith, I understand how you're feeling." said the queen, 'I tried to talk to you before you talked to Harold, lest he should make some stupid comments that would hurt your feelings. You know he truly loves you, and with this in my mind, I feel there is some things of which you should be aware."

'What is that, My Lady?' Edith Swanneck looked puzzled, wondering what it was that the queen had to tell her.

'Do you know that England may soon be embroiled in war?'

'Yes, My Lady; it is expected. Harold has spoken of it.'

'I had a dream that you found a much younger man, a mere boy, to be your lover. Does that not sound odd to you? His name was Hereward.' The queen saw that Edith was now even more confused.

'What a very odd thing to dream, My Lady. Have you consulted a priest as to why you had this dream, and why is it of me?'

'There is a hermit in Winchester. He, it is said will know the meaning of such a dream. You will come with me to see him and together we will understand its meaning. Edith, do not be afraid, for no harm will come to you or your children. You are under my personal protection.'

'Thank you, My Lady.'

Edith bade the queen farewell, and turning around, took one last glance at the man she loved.

As he stepped down toward the cheering throng below, Harold saw her gaze. He felt the elation, yet the loneliness of his high position. He stood motionless, looking at her. He felt the tears welling up as he gazed at her beauty, and he wanted her by his side, but she looked away, turned about, and walked into the

crowd, to disappear amongst the multitude. He was going to waken from his dream any moment; everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. He looked about for Stigand and noticed Brithnoth helping Stigand down the abbey steps.

The new king made his way amid the cheers of the crowd, followed, and surrounded by a guard of brightly dressed housecarls. Their shields painted in brilliant colours, with the bosses on their shields polished and gleaming in the sunlight. He mounted his horse, a great bay charger. He paraded slowly through the streets of London, clearly enjoying the adoration of the crowd; he was used to that. They were waving and cheering. He called out to them to be joyful. And then, after some considerable time, he rounded the corner of the abbey once more, and into the palace square, where he entered the gates to ready himself for the last part of the festivities.

Harold entered the king's palace to bows from the servants and staff. He reflected at how he had bowed to Edward in much the same manner. It felt somehow alien to him. He felt alone, isolated. He wanted to be approachable, yet remain aloof, as a king should. God had not touched him; he knew that. Neither was the devil about his person. It all seemed rather strange. Is this reality or is it all a dream? No, I am king! The King of England, too, he thought. Next to him, Stigand laughed, letting everyone know he'd never felt so good.

Harold felt the relief that it was all over, and called for wine. They both needed the relief that copious amounts of alcohol would bring to numb their now heightened senses.

'Come along, Harold; we have a banquet to attend. By the way, the queen and I will smooth things with Edith. She will soon accept how things have to be; you'll see.' He felt Stigand's jolly tone becoming somewhat of an irritant to him, but said nothing; it was not the time or the place to tell him to shut up. Relieved it was all over, Harold spoke in a soft tone to the old man.

'Thank the Lady Mary that the ceremony is over and done. Now, I'll rid myself of these cumbersome robes and dress in my usual and comfortable attire.' He stopped what he was about to do, he was thoughtful. He turned to Stigand and gazed into his eyes.

Stigand could see the sadness within his king, and it troubled him.

'What is it, Harold? Please, tell me.'

Harold took in his the hand of Stigand.

'Stigand, I want you to pray with me for the soul of the boy, Osfrid.'

Stigand was bemused. He wanted to ask why Harold was so concerned for the soul of this lowly youth of no importance, but thought better of it, and did as his king bid him. Harold knelt before the archbishop, and placed his hands as in prayer. In silence, they prayed; and then Harold stood up, coughed, and thanked his confessor.

At that moment, Stigand understood the goodness and humanity of the man he had just seen crowned king. He looked on as Harold donned his normal clothing and took a sip of wine.

'You know, you should now be dressed by your servants, Harold. Now that you're king; it's expected.'

'It may have been the way of Edward, but I am not Edward. In this land, I

rule as king, yet I rule with my people as my equals.' For the moment, he did not feel like debating the point with him. All he wanted to do was to get this wretched banquet over with and sleep. 'Let's get this celebration done with, and and then to bed. I am so tired, I could sleep for a week.'

Stigand looked wearily into Harold's eyes.

'Have you room for two in that bed, Harold?'

CHAPTER TEN

Bitter north winds were blowing over the Normandy coast that January morning as the messenger from England finally landed on flat sands. As he made his way inland, ice on a primitive cart-track road made the traveller weary when his horse occasionally slipped, and stumbled in the frozen amalgam beneath its feet. He made his exhausted way to find the lodgings of Robert Fitzerneis. His hands felt so numb from the cold that he no longer had sensation in his fingers. Upon arriving at his destination, he knocked hard on the solid oak door, eager that his journey was nearing its end.

'Messenger! Messenger!' he called. His voice had a tone of earnest anticipation that turned to relief as the door opened. Before him stood a tall, slim woman of about twenty years with fair hair and large brightly piercing blue eyes, which had a kindness about them. Her nose was small and she had full lips that complemented her outward features that reminded him of a girl he had known as a youth, but her name frittered about his consciousness elusively. He noticed her astonishment at his unexpected visit and followed her as she beckoned him indoors.

'I am Hilda. Please, follow me.' she said softly. 'Come, you must warm yourself; you look ill.' she said leading him into the kitchen to an inviting fire.

He looked at the hearth with its flickering blue and yellow-orange flames that seemed to motion him closer to receive their somnolent warmth; he then smelled freshly baked bread, which made his saliva, flow profusely. On a spit, a hind leg was roasting. It smells like horse, he thought. He saw a kitchen maid barely out of childhood, slowly turning the spit, and his salivation gained ground; it had been two days since his last nourishing meal. He swallowed his saliva, before regaining his composure and wonder if he might ask for some hot food.

Hilda shooed the maid, ushering her to leave the kitchen and she watched in silence as the maid left. As the girl closed the kitchen door, she began speaking in soft, caring tones to him. Yet, despite his bedraggled state, she noticed his dignity and familiar personal power exuding from him.

'My God, you look awful.' she said, as she observed his hands, which were blue from cold. 'I can see by the seal on your bag that you're no ordinary messenger. Please, sit down. Tell me, where have you come from and what is your business?' She motioned him to sit closer to the fire. She placed his leather messenger's bag down upon the table, then she noticed the wax seal still intact upon the clasp. Taking his hands in hers, she began gently rubbing them, warming and reinvigorating the flow of blood to his numbed fingers, and heard his teeth

chattering, barely managing to speak. She saw him nod his thanks to her as she tried to calm his shivering.

'M- m- my name is Henry. I have to find Duke William. I have brought the gravest news from England. I am told that Robert Fitzerneis dwells here, that he will know where the duke is to be found.' he replied through chattering teeth.

'First, you must warm yourself. You look as if you will drop dead at any moment. Rest here while I go fetch my husband.' Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully as she looked him over before leaving the room.

As she walked off to another part of the lodge to find her husband, Henry sat and enjoyed the warmth of the fire. He could feel the unpleasant tingling in his fingers and toes that he recognized as a sign of mild frostbite. His damp clothes, such as they were, began to steam from the fire's warmth. He turned the spit and smelt the juices as they dripped into the fire, making crackling sounds as fire and fat met to fuel yet more flames. On the table was a large leather flagon. It still contained some wine, and he wondered if it would be right to take a sip. He thought better of this act of theft and resisted the temptation. He noticed the sweet smell of lavender that cast his thoughts back to the beginning of his journey, when a woman he had known only as Mary had given the message he was to deliver.

She was an undersized woman with flame red hair who received her orders from a monk who was a remnant of the days when confessions were taken in the private chapel at the court of King Edward. The monk, known only as Charles the Hairy, always had Edward's ear. He was the messenger of the king's private thoughts, which flew back and forth to the king's family of sycophants in Normandy. Charles was a wily man, with a network of runners to the coast, and kept Duke William informed as to the state of affairs in England.

Mary was just such a runner in the employ of Charles. She was a strong-willed woman whose husband had died in a fight with a peasant farmer many years previously. She had given him succour when he needed to have the company of a woman. He didn't have feelings for this woman other than an appreciation for her intelligence and her skills in bed.

On the morning of his departure to Normandy, she had passed over to him three gold, and ten silver coins, and the sealed bag containing the message he was to deliver personally to Duke William, by-passing the normal route she used. He felt privileged and proud he'd been chosen to perform this momentous task.

Never had he positive feelings for the Godwinson family, so this mission, for him, had become a sacred task, a crusade of good over evil. 'They run the place as if they were bloody kings.' He mumbled to himself, 'Now that thieving Harold really has stolen my master's crown. Boy, when Duke William gets hold of Earl Harold, he'll twist his head so that when he's walking north, he'll be looking south.' He chuckled at the thought. 'My lord will have Godwinsons codlings for this transgression. That will teach the usurping toad to steal my lord's crown.'

He was pulled from his reverie by the sound of voices from another part of the lodge that became louder as the speakers approached the door. Soon a tall, muscular man opened the door and walked into the kitchen followed by his lady, Hilda. He had large, dark brown eyes, a Roman nose, and very short black hair.

He wore a sheepskin jerkin and fleece boots that covered his linen hose that finished well above his knees. The man had an athletic appearance about him, and took and educated guess that Robert was a trained warrior. A man who knew the hardships of fighting and the suffering that the elements could bring to any man when exposed to such extremes, just as he had done in oft times past.

Robert approached him and looked for something on the back of Henry's right hand, something Hilda had seen. He clasped the man's wrist and looked carefully at the back of Henry's now normal, pink hand. The tattoo, amongst the wrinkles, depicted a goose. It was faded, but confirmation. He knew this man was no serf.

He lifted his own youthful hand to the eyes of the messenger; the goose was clearly visible. A knowing look of admiration and respect, and a smile rested upon Robert's face, for he knew Henry, too, had been a warrior in his youth. He felt great sympathy for Henry's bedraggled and distressed state. There was a note of respect in his voice that Henry sensed and welcomed.

'My wife informs me that your name is Henry, and that you've brought important news. Tell me, Henry, might I know what it is?' he asked, as they sat taking the warmth of the fire. There was silence for a moment. Robert once more looked at the back of Henry's hand smiling at this brave, brave man.

Then Henry spoke abruptly, then he realised he had taken Robert by surprise.

'Sir, my message is for the Duke's ears only. What I can say is that there is a new king on the English throne. My orders are to convey my message to the duke, himself. I need to find him soon, and I am told you know where he is to be found.' Robert gave the old man a hard look. He knew what this news would mean. Once William had this information, there would be a full-scale mobilization.

'Duke William's current location is at his hunting lodge, a little to the south of Quenilly. It's a good day's ride, and clearly, you look very ill; I should accompany you.' Robert poured two goblets of wine and passed one to Henry, and watched as he sipped from it slowly. Henry took a bite of bread and a slice of hot horse meat, washing it down with another mouthful of wine. His appetite was now returning to normal, and he felt the fire warming the deepest parts of his being. He was tempted to ask for shelter for the night, but he had a mission to accomplish. The pleasures of a warm bed, he pondered, would have to wait.

'No, sir; as I have said, I've strict orders. I have been told that I must be totally alone throughout my journey.'

'As you wish, but you must take this path.' advised said reaching out for a stick, and using the implement he drew a map in the smooth ash deposit on the hearth, giving detailed instructions of the signs that Henry should look for en route. Henry looked on, taking in the information he needed to complete his task.

'There Are robbers on these roads, and this path should keep you safe.'

Robert continued, 'Perhaps the night journey would keep you out of harm's way, but the coldness of this night might slow your progress. I can see you're a good and reliable servant, Henry. I'm sure you will fulfil your mission.' he said as he looked for Hilda; seeing her through the partially open door, he called to her.

'Hilda, bring Henry some food to take with him.' He turned to look once more at Henry.

'I'll see that you have a fresh horse. You shall have warm clothes, a new sheepskin jerkin, and a good hat.' Robert reached out and gently, touched Henry's arm. With a kind look in his eyes for a man dedicated to his task, he then lightly squeezed his arm, and noticed that Henry's response was one of embarrassment. Robert smiled and apologized.

'I thank you, sir. You are a good man. I will inform the duke of your kindness and generosity.' Henry looked up to see that Hilda had brought fresh clothing, allowing Henry to change into comfortable attire for the first time in many days.

Robert called for a groom to ready a fresh horse, while Hilda prepared some food for Henry to carry on his journey. After fastening his boots, Henry rose from the chair, took the bag from the table and placed it over his shoulder.

'I must now be on my way.' he said as he reached for Hilda and held her hands in his.

'Be safe. I know what you are. I noticed the tattoo on your hand. You are a good man.' Henry made no reply. He was feeling self-conscious about being recognized. His head bowed a little, and he just smiled; then he turned toward the door where Robert was waiting.

Robert shepherded the messenger through the door and outside to the waiting horse.

'When you've completed your task, Henry, you must return to spend time with us.' Robert said, as he patted Henry's leg, his smile sincere. Henry smiled back and whispered,

'Thank you; I will.' Henry said, then kicked the horse, and he started the last part of his journey. As he rode off into the night, he looked over his shoulder and saw Robert and Hilda waving goodbye.

Henry rode hard for the first few minutes or so to warm the muscles of his fresh steed. His steed was a good horse, intelligent, too, and he sensed it, responding well to his reins. To conserve the beast's energy, Henry then slowed the animal to a canter as he made his way through the darkness to Quenilly, where Henry suspected that William would be quarrying his prey with hounds, the next morning.

The frost-laden air once more took a grievous bite at the man who fought back like a dragon slayer, falling; then picking himself up to fight back against the freezing foe.

After some time, Henry was still pleased with his mount; it seemed to want to gallop, with no thought for its tired limbs. But he felt he ought to stop and rest the horse. As he came across a small clearing, he pulled up the horse and dismounted. The moon was full and bright, its rays almost as if they were for him only, illuminating the scene as if it were daylight. He walked the horse for a while to avoid its shivering, and tethered the snorting beast, its sweat steaming off like hot water from a boiling cauldron. He could not feel his fingers, but in the darkness, could not see the damage the frost had done to them. As best he could, he hitched the animal to a tree then took from his

saddlebag a pig's bladder that held the wine he had been given. He took some food, ate, and drank his fill; then he remounted.

The cold night air became his enemy once more, the wind more vicious and menacing. He felt his bones as he had never felt them. His skin, despite his sheepskin covering, was clammy and cold; and the shivering became intense. Henry was beginning to feel inwardly cold and very tired, almost exhausted. He rode on utilizing what the moonlight afforded to him to light his way, taking the safest route towards the lodge where Walter Giffard, Duke William's right-hand man and childhood friend, would be taking care of the duke's business.

The morning light was just showing when at last Henry came in sight of the duke's lodge.

Alan Domfront was brushing out the coat of his first horse of the morning when he noticed something. He paused at the sight of the weary traveller, who was slumped across the neck of the horse was walking towards him. Alan approached the man and took the bridle in his hands. Philippe ran towards the rider and helped him dismount. Henry could barely stand, so Philippe half carried him to a log a couple of paces away and seated the man down upon it. Alan passed over to Philippe the horse's woollen blanket, and led the horse away to stable.

'Leave the horse for now. You had better call Walter Giffard, and quickly, Alan. This man is near to death.' He noticed the leather bag that carried a seal upon it. He looks like a messenger, he thought as he rubbed Henry's ice-cold hands observing the man's acutely blackened fingers. He glanced at the rider's nose, and he saw that too was in a blackened state, and the flesh was frozen. He knew, from experience this meant the death of the man's extremities, and soon the messenger would die of exposure or gangrene.

Henry was breathless and exhausted after his long and arduous journey. Fighting to get the news out, he almost collapsed forward, trying to fight off the desire to sleep. Gulping in his breath, thick in the freezing cold morning air. Henry was weary, trying his hardest to collect his thoughts.

Inside the lodge Alan spoke with Walter about the rider.

'He looks very ill, sir. Philippe is with him and we're not happy about his condition.'

'Very well, Alan. I suppose I ought to go and see what he has to say.' Giffard replied, as he tied his straps around his leggings. He looked upwards, his ears straining to hear the noise in the distance. Dogs barked, and horns began to blow. When Giffard approached Henry, it was with cold curiosity. He waved Philippe away from the messenger, who strolled back to join Alan in the lodge.

Henry looked up at Giffard, and observed that he was not a tall man, but strong and stocky. His hair was blond and his eyes a soft light blue-grey.

'He's a messenger, aright.' Philippe said as he looked back from the doorway. 'It looks as if he's come a long way, too. What's more, we ought to have brought him inside, and warmed him by the fire.' Alan shrugged.

'The man is all but dead, and the warmth of a fire wouldn't be of any help to him; you know that.' he replied matter of factly, warming his hands by the fire.

Philippe closed the door then joined his brother by the fire.

'You're right of course. It's too late for him. I hope that the man is able to pass on his message, though he has a bag with a sealed clasp.'

Outside, Giffard gazed down at the wretched soul slumped before him. He nudged his boot, disturbing the man, who was still desperately trying to keep from falling asleep.

'Well, what is it you've come here for? Is it a message?' he asked indignantly.

Henry tried to speak, but as before, the cold had once more taken its deadly grip on him. He tried to stand, but his legs would not do his bidding; he had lost all feeling in them.

'In God's name, man, what is it?' he demanded, clearly irritated with the man's lack of instant cooperation. Giffard held him by his tunic, pulling him close, almost nose to nose, then realised the messenger's physical exhaustion was total, and he allowed Henry to sit back down.

'King Edward is dead, sir. On King Edward's death, Harold Godwinson took the crown, and was enthroned on the very same day as the funeral of the old king.'

Giffard was astounded and visibly stunned at this news. Thinking fast, he knew he had to tell Duke William, but wondered how the message safely could be told without incurring the duke's wrath. He looked thoughtfully at the poor, wretched man, and placed his hand on the man's shoulder and saw that the messenger was now barely conscious, desperately fighting to stay alive. His thoughts returned to how William would react when he received the information.

'Harold Godwinson is now King of England! Stay right where you are, and I will come back for you. You must tell the duke exactly what you have just told me. Exactly. You got it?'

'Yes, sir, exactly.' Henry replied groggily, his eyes began rolling, looking to hide behind his eyelids. His head slumped down onto his chest, and he fell asleep.

Giffard walked briskly towards his horse, visibly shaking and was barely able to mount his steed. At last, he set himself onto the saddle and geed up his mount. With trepidation in his heart he rode off into the hunting grounds to find Duke William. In the distance, he could hear the hounds barking, and it was not long before he saw them chasing the duke's quarry through to a clearing towards where William would be waiting to kill his deer. He caught sight of the Duke, who was standing behind a tree with a crossbow, making sure the duke had killed his deer before going anywhere near him.

As the deer fell to the ground, the duke heard Giffard, who was some way behind, call to him.

'William! William! News! News!' he called at the top of his lungs.

Duke William Forkbeard was aged twenty-nine years and stood taller than any man in the dukedom. His body was supple, of solid rippling muscle. To his enemies, known as William the Bastard. His bright red hair was always in disarray giving him a wild look. He sported untamed sideburns, an unkempt red beard, and bright piercing blue eyes that would turn a man to stone at a mere glance from him. He was a cunning, murderous man, with a temper that would have

put the fear of God into God!

William mounted his steed and looked toward Walter Giffard, who was still waving to catch his attention. With a puzzled look, he rode hard towards him.

'What the hell is going on, Giffard? This had better be good, or by God I'll have you stripped and whipped!' he said, staring at Giffard demanding an explanation.

'You must follow me, William. A messenger has news of the greatest importance.' William sat upright, looked about him, and beckoned toward his retinue that they should follow.

'This had better be the best news I have ever heard, Walter, because I was having the finest hunt I have had in months. So, you'd better tell me; what is it?'

'A messenger from England. He has news of the greatest concern and needs to tell you from his own lips.' he replied hoping the wrath from William would fall on anyone but him. William glanced back at him with a hardness he reserved only for fools and rogues.

'You know something, Walter Giffard. Your thoughts reek of pig piss. Now' tell me. Where is this messenger?'

'Yonder, about five hundred paces. Follow me. The messenger is exhausted from his journey.' said Giffard turning his horse about. William followed cantering a few paces behind. Coming into the clearing Giffard saw the messenger just as he had left him, seemingly asleep. To the messenger's side was his mailbag. Giffard approached the messenger and shook his shoulder to awaken the man, but Henry fell to one side, lifeless. Giffard froze. He felt faint. What was he to do now? He gazed up at William, and panic gripped him as he felt his stomach muscles tighten. He could handle anything, but this was something he'd never trained for.

Oh, my God, he's dead!' Giffard exclaimed. His legs began to shake, his mind racing. What, he thought, am I to do now? He picked up the messenger's mailbag and gave it to William, but the duke tossed the bag back to him and saw the duke glare back at him, for William was illiterate and Giffard knew it, too.

You'd better open the bag Walter. After all, what is the point of paying a monkey if you have to do all the work yourself, eh?' William's frown changed to a smile. The iron duke chuckled, then winked at Giffard.

It's sealed, My Lord. Look, the seal is unbroken.' he replied holding up the bag. Giffard broke the seal, opened the bag, and took out the contents, guessing what it would read. He sensed his nervousness was becoming acutely visible to the duke.

William noticed Giffard's posture and suspected he knew the contents of the letter.

'You know what it says; don't you, Walter?' William barked, his eyes narrowing to a frown.

'The bag was sealed, William, and the letter has a seal, too. Look, it's intact.' Walter lifted the letter to show his master, his arm shaking violently. Thinking he would now be whipped, he moved a pace or two backward keeping well out of range.

'Well, you'd better read the contents, then.' William ordered, irritated.

Giffard gingerly broke the second seal and unrolled the parchment, his mind working overtime, knowing that William would explode, and he didn't want to be on the receiving end of his master's fury. Visibly shaking he read the message.

'Out loud, sire?' Giffard asked, politely, as if he needed to ask.

'Yes, out loud! Well, let's have the news. What does the letter say, man?' William demanded, impatiently.

Giffard sensed William was becoming more irritable by the second. As he looked at the words his mind raced to make sense of the contents, wondering how he could soften the blow of this momentous message he held in his grasp. He felt the sweat run down his cheeks making him feel even more uncomfortable. The palms of his hands became tacky and he took in a deep breath, but it made no difference.

'To- to my noble Lord, William. I have to inform you that our gracious King Edward, whom God gave us - so - so - so did God take from us on this the fifth day of January, in- in- in the twenty-fourth year of his reign.' he gulped for more air, desperate to compose himself. He felt the warm, yet horrid trickle of urine run down his left leg. William's eyes lit up. His face beamed a grin that would have made the top of his head fall off if the edges had met. Giffard crossed himself and whispered a short prayer under his breath.

'How on earth,' he thought, 'am I going to relay the rest of the message's contents?'

'Edward is dead. Then we must make haste to England. Giffard, we must go prepare ourselves for a coronation' he retorted jovially.

Giffard threw a hesitant look towards his master; he stammered as he searched for the words he knew would make the duke explode. He knew that William would never be able to contain his anger so fierce, that Giffard feared the sun and would run and hide from the duke.

'M- m- my, Lord, there is more.' he blurted wondering if this was to be his last day on earth. This was something he had not experienced before. His imagination began to take control; he saw himself burning at a stake, the flames licking at his legs, when he was startled abruptly, back to reality.

'What do you mean; more?' he asked quizzically, leaning forward, as if hard of hearing.

Giffard felt faint. He really wanted not to be there any longer.

'Giffard!' William roared. 'What else is there I should know? Come on, spit it out!' Giffard looked at his feet, and with a stammering voice, Giffard exclaimed. 'Harold Godwinson has been crowned King of England, my lord.'

William's face turned bright blue, and his surge of anger, made everyone near him back away for fear the duke would lash out and kill.

Giffard ran to the bushes, as his legging filled with wetness unusual for him, and hid out of sight, leaving his mount to trot off into the woods, where it stopped and grazed.

The duke's eyes bulged, and the muscles in his face began to pulsate. He began huffing and puffing as the saliva forced from between his teeth dribbled down his chin. A deep gurgling sound came from his throat until he at last was

able to articulate the words his brain forced through his vocal chords.

'BY THE BLACK BALLS OF LUCIFER, I WILL HAVE MY REVENGE, GODWINSON! I WILL TAN THE HIDE OFF YOUR BODY, AND ALIVE, I WILL BOIL YOUR BLOODIED BODY IN TAR!'

If Harold Godwinson could not hear this promise, the rest of the world surely did! William was so enraged that his horse tried to bolt from under him. William took control of the reins and brought the horse once more under his control, then turning in his saddle, looked about for any sign of Walter Giffard.

Where the hell is Walter Giffard? Giffard!' the duke bellowed, while looking about for and not seeing any sign of him until Giffard crawled out from behind the bush he'd hidden in some moments before and showed himself to his master, who then pointed to Engenulf-of-Laigle, a companion of William for many years.

'Engenulf, I want you and the Domfront brothers to inform Matilda. Tell her that the household is to be made ready for our immediate return.'

Engenulf beckoned toward Alan and Philippe to follow him, and without a word, Alan and Philippe each mounted a horse, and the three men then rode off in the direction of the castle.

William watched the riders receding for a moment and turned to Giffard.

'Walter, you stay by my side, is that understood?' Giffard nodded and remounted his horse as William turned his horse about, and the rest of his retinue followed him back to the hunting lodge to change horses at the stables.

On their journey to the castle, Engenulf looked at Philippe, smiling broadly.

'You two reprobates have joined our merry band at just the right moment. It would seem we are in for a fun time, Philippe.'

Alan looked confused, and leaned towards Engenulf, eagerly wanting to have his curiosity satisfied.

'Tell me, Engenulf, what the hell was all that about? I have never seen Giffard so frightened in all the time I have been here. He's a tough neck, but heck, he pissed himself when the boss raged. Are you going to tell us what went on? You were the nearest to him.'

'What do you know of England, where the Saxons live?'

'Philippe and I have been there only once, and then only for a couple of days. Edward was their king, other than that, not much else. Why do you ask, Engenulf?'

'Not to put too fine a judgement on it, Alan. William was promised the English crown when King Edward died. It looks like one of his top earls has taken the crown for himself. So there may be some arses to be kicked when William decides he needs to collect his due reward.' Alan looked across at Philippe, who, in return, looked back, shrugged. Philippe drew his horse nearer to Engenulf, their legs almost touching as they cantered along the muddy road back to the castle.

'So, what happens now then?' Philippe asked, looking intrigued.

'I've no idea, Philippe.' Engenulf replied with a shrug, and pulling a face. 'As William's bodyguards, we will, no doubt, be required to accompany him to England while he endeavours to wrestle his throne from whoever has it. I doubt it will mean a fight or anything, just a matter of a hand-over of power, I

should think. It's quite normal for someone to step in to look after the place when the king dies until the rightful heir is able to return from wherever he is.'

'Who has control until then?' he asked with a look of intrigued excitement.

'Harold Godwinson. It seems he may have overstepped his boundaries somewhat.'

'You mean he has taken the crown for himself, and made himself king?'

'That's about the size of it, Philippe. Though, between you and me, he will give it up when Duke William comes to claim his rightful position. As for Harold, I quite like the man. He has balls and is very clever too. He was on an expedition with us when we had to quell an uprising in the south, not so long back. My guess is that their council has just put him in charge of things for a while. I don't think he's really been crowned king or anything like that.'

Engulf looked quite confident in his evaluation of the situation and gave a smug grin.

'But the duke blew his top. What was all that about?' Alan asked curiously.

'It's his way. He's always doing that. I would pay little attention to it.'

Engulf said as the trio approached the castle gates, to see them opening before them, and they entered the courtyard. As they dismounted, three stable boys took their horses and began to unsaddle and feed their steeds.

'I'd better go seek out Matilda and tell her what I know, and keep my head down. She can be fiery too you know. You two can go and get yourselves rested for a while if you like. I'll send some one for you when you're needed, okay?'

'It's a warm fire we need, Engenulf. But I'm sure Alan and I will find sufficient warmth once we get to the kitchens and fill our bellies.' Philippe replied waving towards his colleague as Engenulf strolled off in the direction where Matilda held court.

Engenulf walked briskly to the duke's private quarters and made his entrance into the anti-chamber to be greeted personally by Matilda, Duke William's long suffering wife who'd see his arrival and had been waiting for him.

'My Lady, there is news, King Edward is dead. Earl Harold has been crowned king. My master will soon be approaching the castle, and I need to brief you in full all that has been said by a messenger sent from England.' he said, trying to find a line that would not upset her too much.

'I hope that I'm not to lose my husband to yet another campaign, Engenulf. My husband nearly died once. I almost lost him to the worst enemy of all, illnesses. However, as you can see, he recovered, but not before being given the last rites by his chaplain.' She placed her hand upon the young man's arm and smiled warmly at this trusted servant. Engenulf smiled and nodded lightly; he understood well enough.

'Thank you, Engenulf. You look like you could do with a hot bath and a good meal. Go to one of the chambers to rest, Jenny will see to your requirements.'

she said as she motioned to a maid to escort Engenulf to a room.

Matilda strode over to, and looked out from, a window high above the courtyard. She carried her twenty-eight years very well. Her body constantly pregnant and rounded, yet not fat. Her large, voluptuous breasts gave the impression that they started from her midriff and ended just short of the base

of the short stub of her neck. She had a round face, a small, petite nose, and bright red hair. She was small, almost a midget, unlike her father, Baldwin, Count-of-Flanders, who was as tall as William.

Matilda was the mother of three of the twenty or so children playing in the courtyard. Devoted to them as she was, she was stern, almost to the point of cruelty. She knew only too well that they must learn to stand on their own two feet, for their father had many enemies, and they were in constant danger of kidnap. She recalled their father, William. He had been the victim of a couple of rather touch-and-go abduction attempts when he was just a small boy. He made sure that Matilda kept a careful watch on them at all times.

Robert, the eldest, was quite a handsome child, a happy go-lucky-boy of thirteen years with a strong physique and bright blue eyes who was always running away, hiding, anything to avoid a confrontation. Richard was a shy eleven year old and was physically an underdeveloped child. Being a careful person, he avoided anyone with an illness for fear he would catch it and die of some ague. William Junior was six years of age. He was a strong, but thin boy with colouring like his parents, but much redder in complexion. The capillaries on his face stood out and spread like roots of a plant. His brothers took every opportunity to remind William that he was a red face and called him Rufus.

Matilda thought of her daughters and of those that she had lost shortly after childbirth, and a tear for the dead children occasionally took her by surprise. Today was to be no exception, for she named each of her dear departed before the bodies of the deceased were buried. She crossed herself and mumbled each of their names as she strode into her bedchamber.

Jenny, Matilda's personal maid, walked into the bedchamber, where she put the clean linen in fine cedar chests, carved with animal designs and intertwining ribbons like snakes in the Norse fashion.

Matilda swivelled about, noticing Jenny with an arm full of linen.

'Go and collect the children, and bring them here, Jenny.' Matilda ordered.

'Yes, ma'am. Will that be all, my lady?' she asked, bowed her head respectfully and submissively, then left the room.

Matilda strode over to another window giving her yet another commanding view. Her thoughts were of William, her youngest son. Thinking aloud was a trait Matilda had possessed from childhood, and began her lone monologue.

'I must see to it that he is taken care of now that Harold has been crowned king. That means that William will make plans to invade England. Should their father die in battle. The boys having no father, then I must rule the dukedom against the wolves to secure the dukedom for Robert until he comes of age. Oh, William, why? Do we really need England? Do we really not have enough?'

Suddenly her thoughtful musing is broken by loud noise and raucous voices in the courtyard below. She looked down once more to see Jenny walking below, gathering the three boys while the other children were being ushered away to play outside the boundary wall. Deep in thought, she mused to herself.

"I must ask William for permission to send young William to be educated away from Normandy, where he will be safe from harm, should calamity befall us.'

She thought on William's expected reactions to this request, but she hoped

that he really would not mind. He nearly always granted her every desire, but this was a little different. He often took the boys hunting with him, and trained them in the art of warfare himself.

From the hall, she could hear her boys running up the stairway, and the calls from Jenny to be careful.

'Not so fast young masters. Please, not so fast!' William was first through the door.

'Mother, Robert has killed fifteen men with one blow from his sword!'

'Did he now?' she replied with a smile so wide that she could hardly control her delight at their playfulness.

'Well, it's only pretend fighting. We just made up a game that we invaded Main, and the occupants were too frightened to come out. So we went in and slaughtered the mayor and his retinue until the townspeople surrendered the town to us.' Robert replied, his tone matter of fact.

'You have your father's cunning, Robert.' Matilda smiled patting the boy's head.

'Indeed, no, mother; for it was William's idea. He thought up the plan; he is very good at that sort of thing, you know.'

'Is he now? Well, let's see how good your cunning is in class. Your tutor has been here for over an hour, so you had better make your way to your rooms for schooling, my boys. Jenny, see to it they wash and are clean of clothing before they go to their tutor. Go on, boys, and are courteous to the tutor.'

'Yes, Mother,' said the boys in unison, and off they went with Jenny in hot pursuit.

An hour later, the sound of horses came to Matilda's notice as she looked out to see her husband and his entourage slowly approaching the gates of the great castle. William rode slightly behind with two knights leading the way.

'Open the gates!' One of Williams, company called aloud. The men who manned the gates pulled on the great wheel, which drew the ropes that, in turn, pulled the great gate open. William entered, along with thirty or so men-at-arms. The smell of horses and the steam of sweating horseflesh always made Matilda feel nauseous. She looked away, and made her way to the Great Hall two floors below to await her husband. Calling the servants together, Matilda ordered them to ensure the fires were well stacked and cauldrons hot. The cooks were set to feed the men-at-arms and the livery boys sent to see the horses stabled. Her orders were always obeyed to the letter and at once.

'Jenny, make sure there is plenty of hot water in the master's bedchamber. Be quick about it, girl. The master will want to bathe the moment he comes through the door.' Jenny curtsied respectfully and made her way to the duke's bedchamber, taking with her several under-maids to do their mistress bidding.

Shivering from the cold, William and Giffard entered the great hall. William threw away his gloves to land unceremoniously onto the floor. They walked straight towards the great open fireplace, roaring with a oak fire that crackled and spat. The fire's warmth was the most welcoming feeling to the two men as they rubbed their hands and stamped their feet. William spoke in a soft but meaningful tone as he warmed his hands.

'If it had been anyone else, Walter, I would have torn out their throats for giving such news. As soon as summer is upon us and we have the necessary men, material, and ships, we will be on our way to England. Gilbert, the Bishop of Lisieux, is ready to be off within the next few hours to see the Pope. He's writing the letter giving full details. He has a full clerical entourage, and will leave tonight.'

'You don't hang about, William. Do you think the pope will give us leave and money for the venture?'

'He will. He knows there are riches in it for him when we take England. The greedy toad won't turn down a chance to get his hands on a fortune. Such an investment would yield him more than a fair return, Walter.' William's nose wrinkled. 'What the hell is that smell? It's you, Walter, you stink of piss! Jesus, go stand over there, or change those leggings or something.' The duke watched as Walter dutifully moved out of reach of William's nose.

'I'm sorry, William. I pissed myself back there. You know—full bladder and all that, the excitement of the moment too, of course.'

'The fear of my wrath, more like. Well, see you get bathed and changed. You just stay where you are for the time being.' replied William, who was now happily warming himself by the blazing fire. He gazed up towards the wooden beams, contemplating his next move. 'We will invade England and knock the usurping swine off of his ivory tower, Walter.'

'You jest, of course? You don't have the resources for such an invasion, surely? Even with the help of the Pope.' Giffard replied, wishing he could be close enough to gain some of the fire's warmth.

William glanced at him, smiled, then communicated a sly wink.

'I will, soon enough, Walter. I had messages sent out before we left the hunting grounds, while you were hiding from my rage. Don't worry, Walter, I fully understood. I would have killed the next man who had spoken—be they my father, mother, or whoever. I was so enraged, but you were only delivering the message. I understand that.'

'Well, you can be a bit drastic, William. Impulse was always your way, since we were boys.' Giffard was William's only true friend, and the only person on the planet who understood the great and ferocious duke.

'I know that I can get a bit hot at times, Walter, but heck, the place is full of idiots and fools of every kind. They drive one's patience to distraction. What with those clever bloody clergy and their clever bloody scribes who look down upon me because I can't get a grasp of reading and writing. Scribes with quill pens never won a battle, Walter. Only brave men win battles, not bloody quill pens.' he grumbled, with an indignant tone. 'If they knew what I had to contend with as a child, they might just understand.' then noticing Giffard smirk. 'Don't mock me, Walter. For sure, I will kill you stone dead if you do! I will be your king one day, very soon. So if you value your position, you had better secure your mouth.'

'Hey, steady on, William. I was just thinking of all those clergy and scribes lined up for battle, ready to throw quills at the enemy. To be honest, I nearly laughed at the idea. No more than that, I assure you. One day, though, some

scribe will write a great book all about your great adventure. So you can't put them all down.'

The duke stared at Giffard, his nose wrinkled at the stink emanating from his urine-stained friend.

'Well, it's not a good time, Walter. I am a king now. I need time to prepare, to gather my thoughts about my kingdom. You are getting too close again, Walter. Now, get out of my sight. Go and bathe, you stink of piss.'

Rex illiteratus asinus coronatus, Walter thought.

'Before you go and bathe, what think you of the two new boys?' he asked inquisitively. Four or five men have said they will be a great asset to me.

'You mean the Domfront brothers, Alan and Philippe. To be honest, William, they are both very bright. It's why the monk, Cecil, hired them when we were recruiting in Caen. Philippe has had full training with the French king, and has passed this training on to his brother. They will be an excellent and tangible resource to us I'm sure of that. Philippe, especially, can give commands and never needs telling twice. His brother, Alan, speaks good English. He will be useful too.' The duke glared at him nodded, pinching his nose.

'What ever tangible means? For the third time, are you going to get rid of the smell of piss, or what, Walter?' Giffard smiled and turned to leave, passing Matilda as he did so, he smiled, and walked on.

Matilda crossed the great hall to greet her husband, smiling broadly and with her arms out-stretched.

'My dear husband, you're looking a little pensive. We need to talk about your plans for England. But first, you need to bathe and eat, as you bid Walter. Your bath has all been prepared, and we can talk about your plans later my dear.'

'My sweet plum, we have no plans to invade as yet, but they will come together as the weeks go by. Godwinson should have been dead weeks ago. It looks like my man, Eumer, messed up. Be assured, my love. I will come to no harm. I can see in your eyes that you are concerned for my welfare. Think positively, Matilda. We will soon have a kingdom for our children to inherit, with power and riches beyond your imagination. You will be a queen, my dear.'

'The price for my being a queen is?' she asked standing, staring at him with her arms crossed.

'What do you mean, price? There will only be war if Godwinson refuses to relinquish my throne.'

'William, many good men will die. Some of them will be your closest friends. Do you wish this fate on your associates, just so that you can be King of England? Don't we have enough, my dear?' Matilda's eyes had a pleading but resigned look about them. 'If you're so determined to have a kingdom of your own, think on. You are powerful enough to declare Normandy a kingdom, separate from France. The defence of our territory would be far easier than mounting an expedition to England.'

'No, my love, it doesn't quite work like that. The Pope would back the French king, Philip. As Baldwin is his man, he could be very persuasive. He would, likely as not, offer the Pope half of Normandy, if he sided with him and won against us. We would lose through force of numbers against us. No, England is a

good land rich too. We could take it easily with the Pope's money and blessing. Godwinson will be hard pushed to defend England, if I could make certain alliances to split his forces. After all, even Harold Godwinson can't be in two places at once, my sweet little plum.' He rubbed his hands together, smiled and winked at her.

'You have a scheme brewing, William. I can smell it.'

'Indeed I do, my love, indeed I do.' he said grinning; his natural cunning was once more showing signs of re-emergence. 'Come here, my petite wife, I feel a little...' Matilda stopped him with her finger to his lips.

'Not before you have bathed. I could smell your odour from the courtyard.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning sun, having just burned the early mist from the surrounding pastures seemed without energy enough to warm the air. The clouds were mere wisps of horsetails, and the sky a light blue with a hint of red on the horizon. By its natural cooling freshness the breeze tempered any warmth the bright yellow, life-giving star wished to endow. High above, the last of the migrating birds were arriving from their wintering grounds. The seagulls called out, screeching as if to warn of an ill portent about to befall the listener.

Harold stood atop the tall Dover cliffs, scanning the sea. As he peered across the choppy waters of the English Channel he felt the chilly north wind which made his teeth chatter, unusual for a late July day. He could see the coastal cliffs of France, some twenty miles to the south. The silent white streak of the French coastline broke the sky sharply from the sea. He looked at the fishing vessels of every kind working between the two shores, some taking mackerel, others cod or herring. He was happy trade was flourishing between the two countries.

He had lain awake all night looking up through the window at the clear night sky, observing the strange star with its long tail, and he wondered if the fortune-tellers knew something he didn't. The peripatetic star had seemed to have an odd, almost ghostly appearance and could be seen from many countries; visitors had told him that they too, could see the star. His advisers were very worried, telling him that this great object foretold that a great calamity would befall the country.

'Bah! The streaking star looks over the Normans just as it does over England!' he exclaimed, his expletive comment lost to the wind. His thoughts turned to the witan and the imminent threats that the country now faced from two fronts. He mumbled on, as if talking to an invisible friend. He kicked at a dead seagull, sending it tumbling down the white cliffs into the foaming waves below.

That's how I'll deal with any invasion, he thought. The witan cannot foretell what will happen. They may be a wise and noble assembly, but they can't see how my mind will deal with the forces of evil we are about to face. I did my level best to see the rightful heir to the throne had his opportunity to rule after Edward died. I didn't want to be king, but there was no alternative. The bastard, William, would have made a misery of the Saxon nation and brought

ruination upon us if his claim had witan accepted. I now know what I must do and what must be done. I will consult with my brothers, Swein, Gyrth, and Leofwine, for the time is now at hand. His musing at an end he turned about and slowly walked back to the castle that stood a few hundred paces from the cliffs.

His thoughts shifted to his wayward brother, Tostig. Damn that dim-witted brother of mine! I can't believe he was stupid enough to ravage our southern coast. He took the Isle of Wight, stripped it of all its resources, and then hies himself off to shelter in the Norman ports. At least the bastard saw fit to eject him from his lands. Now he is seeking shelter with Harald Sigurdsson.

'You stupid, queer bastard, you screw up everything!' He fumed at the times Tostig and Edward had gone behind the closed and very private doors of the king's bedchamber. 'He screws ducks, pigs, children, husbands, their wives, even nuns, and then he screws the bloody king! Now he is trying to screw England!' He seethed, muttering his thoughts through his teeth. Once more his words were lost, this time to the sound of seagulls screeching above him. What if I gave the crown to William, and I served him as my lord, he wondered. Could I possibly control him? No, he would never allow the privilege of life to me, or my family. He would kill all us Godwinsons, then he would fill England with sycophantic Normans, just as Edward did. Perhaps I should invade Normandy. I could take him in the rear and nip his claim in the bud. I would need to discuss with Swein and Brithnoth the possible logistics of such an operation.

His eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed as a stern, determined look moulded his features. His fist smashed into the palm of his hand.

'I'm king of this land! Those who wish to come to fight and die; let them come. I will give them only as much land as they are tall, nothing more!' he muttered through clenched teeth.

He turned toward a voice calling against the cold, driving wind. A tall youth of fifteen years of age stood in a side doorway of the castle. He was waving frantically as he tried to attract Harold's attention.

'My lord, the council awaits you!'

Harold smiled at Cedric. He was proud of his tall and muscular yet illegitimate son with bright, almost ginger hair. His blue eyes full of the innocence of youth, yet they were searching, questioning, sometimes unnerving. He thought Cedric looked smart and tidy when he wore a short, quilted ochre-coloured jerkin that was fastened with several seal-bone toggles. His light grey linen hose wrapped tightly, and crossed diagonally, with turned linen strips his sweetheart had embroidered with green diamond patterns. He approached the boy, his frown had long turned into a broad smile as his arm outstretched to greet him. The girls love this boy so much, and they will never leave him alone; ah, the joys of youth, he thought.

'I beg a pardon Sire. Through your absence I feared you were lost to the Normans. Word has it they might try to kidnap you. I'm so happy you are safe.'

Harold noticed Cedric's worried look because he often had to search for his master. With the loss of his friend, Osfrid, thoughts of assassination were always in the back of his mind.

'It would take a bigger man than Goliath to clap me once more in chains,

Cedric.' He gazed lovingly towards the youth and touched the boy's head softly as he thought back to the time he really had been caught and jailed.

'Chains? What chains? Were you once a prisoner?' Cedric asked looking very confused. What happened? Did the Normans capture you, and were you hurt?' continued the questions.

Harold placed his arm around Cedric's shoulder and gave the boy a gentle squeeze.

'No, not by the Normans, Cedric. I was on a diplomatic mission for the king. When of all things, pirates from the northern coast of France attacked my ship! I saw that a storm was brewing when the clouds darkened the sky, and the sea became fearsome. The light faded quickly, so we were forced to follow the coastal lights. The lights had been falsely laid by these thieves to lure ships in such conditions from their courses and onto the rocks off the coast of Ponthieu. It was the custom of Lagan, which had become a law that dated back to the days of King Charlemagne. These men, by their local laws, had sole rights to every wreck they found and made a lawful business of it. Nonetheless, to my mind, they were pirates. My crew and entourage were well out-numbered. My crew and I scrambled ashore and I was taken prisoner. A Norman fisherman who sent word of my capture to Count Guy recognised me. I found myself goaled and chained by Guy of Ponthieu's jailer at Beaurain, Guy's fortress near Hésdin. He owed his fealty and land to Duke William. I was put in fetters to be ransomed to King Edward for one hundred pounds of gold.'

'A hundred pounds of gold! Were you not cross, sire?' Cedric's eyes were wide open; his jaw dropped with astonishment at this very horrid, yet very true story.

'Yes, I was, and I'm still cross. I thought I was worth a lot more than that.' he replied, grinning. He sat down on the grass to adjust his leg straps that had become loose. He looked up to gaze at the boy. He loved Cedric so much, and wondered if he should tell the youth of his true parentage, when the boy interrupted his thoughts with another question.

'What happened then, sire? Did you escape?' Harold looked thoughtful, and almost winced, then gazed earnestly into Cedric's eyes.

'Luck takes on many guises, Cedric. My boatman, a man called Sabert, managed to escape our jailer's clutches. He then made his way to Rouen where he related our story to Duke William. The duke dispatched word that Guy was to personally bring me to Eu', where I met the duke for the first time. I was taken to William and made to swear oaths of fealty to him. At that time, Cedric, I would have agreed to anything to get out of the clutches of that sadistic maniac. There is much more to this story, and one day, I'll relate to you the full tale.' He pointed towards the sea. 'The next time I'm travelling across that stretch of water, I'll be on my guard for counterfeit lights, and make no mistake about that, my boy.' he chuckled, shaking his head from side to side in disbelief at his own flawed judgement.

'What happened to Guy? Did he get his ransom paid to him?' he asked he kneeling down beside him, eager to delve deeper into the thoughts of his king.

'As it happens, yes, he did. However, he didn't gain what he'd expected. He

received one hundred pieces of gold and a manor on the Eaulne. Not a lot really, but a heck of a lot more than he'd held previously.' For a few moments, Harold stared out to sea, his thoughts drifting elsewhere.

Cedric felt comfortable in the king's company. He often wondered why the king favoured him, showing him such kindnesses, giving him so much of his time and attention. Not once did he recall Harold ever raising his voice to him. No country could ever have a finer king, Cedric thought, and he wanted so much to hug his master.

He reached for the boy's arm and held it lightly, then spoke softly,

'You did say the meal is ready, and my platter is full, Cedric?'

'I did, but it may be cold by now. You have roasted duck, as you requested.

'Ah, I recall now, you did tell me. I had better get moving then. You look tired, Cedric. You've not been entertaining the girls, have you?' he laughed as he nudged the boy. 'Have you slept, boy?'

Cedric sighed. He was tired, and he really wanted to sleep, but the time with his master was precious, and he was not going to waste it.

'No, sire, I've not been playing with the girls. I've been watching the star with the great tail. Everyone says it brings ill to all the land. Look, you can still see the star, even in the day.' he replied squinting, pointed skyward towards the streaking light that seemed to hover in the sky. He then looked toward his king, who, in turn, looked upward.

'You think it will bring a great calamity upon us, don't you?'

'I am fearful that it might.' Once more, Cedric gazed up quizzically.

'Have no fear. The land is safe in my hands. In other kingdoms, the star with the tail can also be seen. Does that not mean that misfortune will befall them, too? I don't think so. Come. Let's both eat. Then you, my boy, will go and see to your duties as I will to mine.' Harold got his feet. He placed both hands upon Cedric's shoulders, bowed his head a little and spoke in an earnest tone.

'After I've eaten, I will face the witan Cedric. I must reaffirm my position. I must be sure that what I have planned for my people is right and just.' Turning into the doorway, Harold led the way down the corridor that would take them to the Great Hall, where a meal and the witan waited.

He entered the Great Hall to be greeted by the sound of cheers, clapping, and whoops from the more exuberant members of the assembly. He calmed the joyous throng with a wave of his arms and the hall fell into silence. He looked about the men before him, then glanced at the antlers, shields, and spears that hung on the white limestone walls.

In prominence above the great fireplace, two-handed battle-axes of warriors past were displayed, along with those of Earl Godwin, Harold's father. Above Harold's seat were those personal weapons that had belonged to the long dead King Cnut. An elongated oak table held huge candelabras, which burned all day. Daylight in the Great Hall, which entered only from a few small, glazed slits in the walls, was minimal. There was barely enough light for a scribe to work.

The muttering of a few lowered voices from the great table, the noise of dogs barking, the neighing of horses from the royal stables and the rush of the sea nearly five hundred paces away could be easily heard. Some forty members of the

witan from all over the kingdom had come together to voice their opinions of the imminent threat arising from the two great powers--that of King Harald Sigurdsson, known to many as Hardrada, and of William, Duke of Normandy.

He sat down at the table to eat his meal, picking at it almost nervously. His thoughts were upon what his father would have done under such circumstances. He picked at his roast duck and turnip. Despite his lack of an evening meal the night before, he was not that hungry. He had other, more important things on his mind. This gamble of mine had better work, or England will fall to rivalry and petty grievances, then foreigners will enslave our land, he thought.

Wiping his hands, he took a sip of wine from a silver goblet. He then rose to his feet, dropping his linen cloth on the table. He looked once more towards his father's gleaming shield and battle-axe before turning to face the assembly. The witan stood up and in unison, bowed. Harold called for witan to again be quietened and seated, and harken to his words.

'Gentlemen, it is for great deliberation that we have gathered here to discuss what shall be done about the two men that potentially threaten this kingdom. I wish you to be of one voice, for delay and dissent will not further our course. As you know, we have received two claims to this kingdom. You all know the history of the two claimants. We must look at the assertions to this throne and decide upon their legitimacy.' He hesitated for a moment. He gripped his goblet taking another sip of wine. It's now or never, he thought, I just hope that Brithnoth and the bishops read the wind, or they'll doubtless feel that I've betrayed them. He mused then continued apace. 'If, unanimously, you decide that either of the two claimants have legitimate cause to be your king, I am willing to abdicate, that is, to give up the crown. Gentlemen, the fate, therefore, of this kingdom is now in your hands.' Harold returned to his seat and watched as the Great Hall exploded into an uproar. He glanced at Brithnoth, saw that he was waiting to say something, and nodded his assent for him to speak.

Brithnoth was a stout, yet muscular man of senior years, with long flowing white hair, wide nostrils and a flowing grey moustache. He had fought many battles alongside Harold's father, Earl Godwin, and was known to be a trusted and reliable speaker of truth and a man of great integrity. He was also a fine orator, a rare attribute for a warrior. He returned Harold's gaze and began to vocalize what was in his heart.

'My lord, the witan have gathered for this Gemot to hear a great oration, yet you speak as if in defeat. This is quite against your character. Like your father, you are a great warrior, a nobleman, wise and fearless, yet thoughtful. You have seen many battles, and you won your spurs at the tender age of sixteen. I fought alongside you when we subdued the Welsh. Yet now, you, sire, are willing to give up the throne to Sigurdsson or the Lady Mary forbids it, the bastard, William, and without a fight too.' said great man with a puzzled look.

Loud murmurings from the assembly filled the chamber as Harold leaned over to whisper in Brithnoth's ear.

'My good friend, trust me, I know what I am doing. You just speak your mind; be true to yourself.' he said confidently, and gave his friend a wink.

Brithnoth stuttered for a moment then caught Harold's wink, then turned once more to look at those gathered as the witan sat dumbfounded before him.

'For the time being, that is all I have to say.' The old warrior returned to his seat to gather his thoughts. He looked about the hall observing the commotion amongst those who were aghast at what their king had put before them. The Great Hall began to rumble with disturbed voices and the thumping of fists upon the great oak table.

For a moment Harold was visibly shaken. He wondered if he had miscalculated. Never before had he been accused of cowardice, albeit his friend and companion had fallen short of articulating that word.

Wictred, a respected thegn, stood up, waving, looking for recognition.

'Hear me, hear me!' he called, and once more silence reigned. He looked at Harold for permission to speak, and seeing his king nod his approval, he took the opportunity to vent his thoughts to his king and countrymen.

'Indeed,' Wictred said, graciously, 'We stood behind you, and your father before you, Harold. When the old king wanted to give the kingdom away to the bastard, and to deny Edgar, the Ætheling, and let us be overrun with Normans at court, you and your father fought against it, eventually defeating the odds, despite the king's resistance. You wish now to give up? In God's name, what has come over you?' Wictred looked about the hall, and then resumed his seat.

Harold looked on, passively, gazing at the faces of those before him, his mind racing, feeding his thoughts with the knowledge that the witan might just allow him a dictatorship.

Once again, Brithnoth stood up and looked sternly at his king. Suddenly, he understood the remark that Harold had made to him earlier. You old dog, you are going to pull it off, he thought.

'It is right that the king should call us together. If the king did not consult with us on this grave matter, we would seriously be much aggrieved.' The old man paused as a wave of nods and a mutter of aye emanated from the witan.

'The king needs to have your approval to act on your behalf, rather than call you together every time he needs to make a decision on this particular matter. Time is against us, and what is more, only the king has all the available information that will enable him to act immediately to counter an invasion. And it will come; be assured of that.' he pronounced, pausing to gain what reaction the witan held, and saw that there again was a nodding of heads and calls of aye. He gazed down, looked directly at Harold. 'We are of one mind, sire. You are our rightful king. Did not Edward, on his deathbed, bequeath his kingdom and throne to you? Did he not implore you to guard the country and keep it safe? Did the clergy, along with senior members of this witan, and the late king's wife, Queen Edith, not witness these words? We, *this* witan, confirmed you to your office. It is the law that you are our rightful king, and nothing can or will change that. Unless of course, you resign your rightful office, abdicate the crown and abrogate your responsibilities to favour another. To give up your crown to a Norman Duke or any other bloody foreigner is unconscionable!' Brithnoth had found his form. Harold was going to take the power from the witan, and they were going to willingly transfer their responsibility to him. 'My lord,

surely you shall never give up your throne to Sigurdsson, or that Norman bastard? Brithnoth dramatically huffed into his seat, suppressing a smile. His eyes turned slyly towards his king. The Great Hall rumbled with the renewed sound of low voices.

Brithnoth again surged to his feet, and, with a great crash of his axe on the table, called out.

'I have but one king! I pledged my allegiance to my one true king, Harold! To be subjugated under a Norse or Norman king. It shall never happen, never!' The Great Hall echoed to the call of 'Never! Never! Never!'

It's not over, not quite in the bag, Harold thought. He rose to his feet, raised his hands and called to the assembled.

'My honoured friends, earls, thegns, and aldermen. I hear that you are of one voice, and I accept your charity and affirmation. I had to be sure that it is what you wanted and that you accept my complete leadership through these uncertain times, despite the fact that the path may be painful. We have Sigurdsson to think about, for he does have a distant, yet valid claim, and will pursue this claim with vigour. As for the bastard, well, we will deal with him as and when he makes his move. In the interim, I need to speak to each of you alone. As individuals, you will have a particular part to play.' he paused to take a sip of wine.

'Mark this. The fight, when it comes, will not be easy. You must stand fast. Your men shall be fully trained and the housecarls fully equipped and ready. The fyrd shall be well armed, fed, paid, and able. They shall be well versed in the knowledge of what is required of them. We are a brave nation. Gentlemen, being one are not enough. We must have resolve, and a mighty fist with which we can defeat and crush those who wish to usurp our rightful crown. We will utterly disarm those that come here to take our country and lands from us. Good and prodigious men, we are in a time when we can say that this land is ours. We are right, and we will use our might and our power or die in the attempt. Our Lord, Jesus, with our Mother Mary will be in our hearts when we rejoice and have peace in our house once more.' He gazed about the hall, smiling broadly. He retook his seat and gave the hall what it wanted, an excuse to rejoice and make merry.

Harold was never a drinker. He didn't handle alcohol too well. He rose and left the witan to enjoy their celebration. I'll change clothes and then have some quiet recreation, he thought.

He left the Great hall to amuse himself with Thecla, his favourite hawk, and strolled out into sunshine and onto the lush green grass of the land that was now rightfully his. He caressed the plumage of this fine predator he'd raised himself, and they were rather attached to each other. It felt pleasant to stroll with the bird, and it also delighted him to see Thecla bring down pigeons and seagulls by the dozen, which added variety to his table. He noticed Cedric watching from a doorway and called to the boy to join him.

The youth came running to his side, happy to accompany his king on another excursion. Cedric stroked the bird that Harold had tethered to his arm. He looked up to gaze at his king, determined to grasp an understanding of what was happening at court. The rumours buzzing of war worried him, and he hesitantly

approached the subject.

'My lord. I just don't understand what's happening. Why did you offer to give up your throne? Is it true that we are going to war with Duke William? Who is Harald Sigurdsson?' the boy asked confidently, knowing his king would be honest.

Harold thought that they should sit and rest awhile and he looked for a suitable place for them to sit and be comfortable.

'Cedric. It's about time we talked man-to-man. You're of an age to understand what the world has in store for you.' Harold smiled, placing his arm over the boy's shoulder. He felt secure in his company, for Cedric was an innocent, lost to the ways of the world, knowing nothing of state affairs. It was the time to teach the young lad a little history, to introduce him to the world of men, and to sound the young man out for his thoughts. He sat the young man against the wall of the old Roman-built lighthouse Harold called his Faros, while he found a thick wooden crossbeam and tethered the bird to it firmly, and whispered a few engaging words to her. He ambled back over to Cedric, who was now laid back chewing a long blade of grass. He settled beside the young man and looked up to the roving star above. He was thoughtful, choosing his words carefully.

'You're bright, Cedric, and very sharp, yet naïve. You know nothing of the ways of politics, but this must now change.' Harold sat with his knees close to his chest, clasping his hands around his ankles. He watched a toad as it hopped, waited, and then hopped again, only to see it snatched up by a sharp-eyed seagull to view the world from another angle.

Harold's lips twisted wryly, wondering if the scene he had just witnessed was not somehow prophetic to the words he must now utter, with Cedric being the toad to the evil seagull of men.

Listen carefully, my boy. I have to make sure that what I do as king is with consent of the people. If I am to go to war, it is to secure the safety of this kingdom. I needed to confirm it is 'I' that the people want at the helm. I had to have their backing. A king cannot rule without this consent, for otherwise he would be just one man, alone. He has to show leadership and wisdom. If the king lacks these qualities, he'll not rule for long.' Harold cleared his throat.

'War is a dreadful thing, Cedric, something you've thankfully not experienced. To take a nation to war without good cause and without the consent of the people is unwise. I've been given by my people the privilege to act as I see fit. If this mean being embroiled in battle with some other nation, then so be it. If I can avoid war then I will undoubtedly will. However, if aliens wish to take from us our land and kill our families, then we must fight.'

'What does that mean? I mean have we been actually threatened like this?'

'Well, there has been a tentative but legitimate claim to my crown, one that would avoid war. However, the legitimate claim to the crown has to be accepted by you or on behalf of you, by the witan. A second claimant has also lodged his want to be on my throne. However, both claims have been rejected by the our learned council, as King Edward, along with his office and power, passed the crown to me. This too, was reaffirmed by the witan. Again, the decision was theirs. I have no alternative but to defend our country against assertions pressed by foreigners. It is the wish of the people I continue in my office on

their behalf. The witan abrogated its responsibility to me, its king. This is called democracy, a word the Greeks used for government by consent of the people for the people by the people.

'God chose you, too.'

'Yes, I'm your rightful and anointed monarch. I am also a figurehead, a diplomat too. Diplomacy is a learned art and it's a skill I will teach you. I had to give the witan the choice. Weakness of the people or their king is not tolerated. A good and wise king should show he is strong, yet fair and just. Though the people affirmed me as their king, without their consent to rule, I am nothing.'

'I understand,' replied Cedric, 'the witan chose a wise and powerful man, and I'm proud to have you as my king.' Harold rubbed Cedric's head, ruffling the youth's hair.

'Thank you, Cedric; I appreciate that kind remark. Now, I have something to tell you that you ought to know. You have been in my household since you were seven years old. Your parents brought you to me, asking that I take you in and educate you. Oswald, the man you called father, was dying. He had been a faithful manservant, very good and strong. He was true to Edward, his king, and bondsman to me. Your mother, Hildilid, was a fair woman, a good wife to Oswald. She was with child at the time of your father's death. Sadly, one month after your father died, your mother died, giving birth to a stillborn child.'

'I remember little of my parents,' said Cedric, staring at the ground, 'for my father was either away at war or working in the fields, but I loved my mother. She was sweet and gentle, and would tell me stories from the church scriptures. I cried until Easter for my mother. She was buried in Winchester at your expense. Why did you do this?'

Harold stared deeply into the boy's eyes, and took his hand, he felt tears welling up that he tried hard not to show.

'Cedric, you must know that I am a man of conscience, and I did a wrong to your mother. As a younger man, I lay with your mother. From this union, you came into the world. My father took me away to fight against the Welsh, so your adopted grandparents, Osfrid and Eadgyth, took in your mother. Their son, Oswald, was to become your father on my behalf.' Cedric was not only speechless, but in a numbed shock to hear his real father was Harold, the King of England! He stared wide-eyed and mouth open as Harold continued.

'So, now you know who you are, my boy. You have had the best schooling. You are able to read and write in Latin, French and Greek. Soon you will be placed in a monastery to learn the true meaning of the Holy Scripture. My son, one day you will be crowned the Archbishop of Canterbury. Your life is mapped out, with your safety and welfare assured. Come, I will tell you more of the troubles the kingdom faces. You must know all if you are to understand what is to come about.'

Harold got to his feet, helping Cedric to do likewise. As they walked back along the cliffs, Harold gave the lad a concise history of the previous few years, so that the boy would understand the complexity of the world he was about to enter as a young man. He listened intently, and then stopped Harold with an

unconnected question.

'Is it true your father died of poisoning, and that King Edward was the murderer?' Harold stopped in his tracks, flabbergasted, and stared at Cedric, frowning fiercely.

'What sort of question is that? I am trying to teach you the ways of things and? well, oh, since you ask, no, lad, he died of a stroke. I saw it with my own eyes. My brothers and I carried him out of the Great Hall to see to his needs. I have seen stroke victims many times. One has to live with death every day. When the Lord Jesus calls, one must enter the Kingdom of Heaven in whatever way the Lord, our God, desires. We know not why He takes our lives the way He does. It is not for us mere mortals to question His reasoning. Oh, and before you ask, no, he did not say the alleged words proffered by the tall tale-tellers of the street market. For many years the king had a seething suspicion my father had a hand in the murder of his brother, Alfred. The king was drunk, and made the allegation that my father was responsible for his brother's death. My father denied any involvement.

'What happened then, Father?'

'My father was so drunk that he could neither speak a coherent word nor hardly stand. He fell on his side into my lap and that was it--end of story. My father died three days later in his bedchamber. He was a good man, but liked his wine, and you, my son, should stay away from drinking to excess. Anyway, my father was King Cnut's right hand until Cnut died.' Harold held his finger to his lips, indicating continued silence from the young lad.

'Before you ask, no, King Cnut did not sit on the shore demanding the tide be gone. It was actually in conversation with his ministers that one of them, named Witred, proclaimed that his king could move mountains and holds back the tide. Cnut replied that he was neither God nor wizard. He could prove to them he was just as mortal as they by sitting on his throne, demanding that the tide retreat and nothing would ever change. It was said thus, recorded by the scribes, and misunderstood by the readers of the scrolls in the library. My father was with him and told me the exact words that were said.'

Cedric looked a little disappointed at this explanation. He twisted his head to look at this man whom he so loved, his eyes squinting, with his right hand to his brow, shading himself from the sun. He was looking for a smile, a hint that perhaps his master might have, at some point, been playing with him.

'They were good stories, all the same. I can guess that there are many more tales to recount, but I know you'll disappoint me with the truth.' Cedric said smiling.

'You'll always have the truth from my lips, my son. Sometimes the truth is far harder to believe than a tall tale.' then noticed a quizzical look in Cedric's eye. 'There's something else you wish to ask of me? Come on, spit it out, what is it? I will, as your king and master, allow just one more, then we're off to do some work.'

Cedric moved to face his father with the sun fully behind him. For a moment, Harold looked on, perplexed.

'You want to see if I'm going to be honest. This must be a real dog of a

question you're to throw at me.'

'Father, could you tell me why you accepted the throne? I mean-' Cedric hesitated, the words now lost, as the coherent thought escaped him. Harold noticed the frustration in the boy's face.

'I'm sorry, Cedric, but sometimes, to fully understand the reasons for my actions, I have to justify myself with sound and reasoned argument. Misunderstanding my motives might lead to problems. To be honest, the thegns that make up the witan are as capable of sound control and judgement as a flock of birds. They'd be fighting amongst themselves while the vultures swooped. Someone has to take the reins.'

'Oh, I see.' but Harold slowly shook his head.

'Perhaps this can wait until another time. I really do have work to do. England doesn't govern itself you know, just as a ship needs to be guided to its destination, sometimes against the wind.' He placed an arm on Cedric's head, pulling him gently to his bosom. He tenderly slid his fingers through Cedric's hair and shook the boy's head. 'Come on, boy; let's watch as Thecla takes a couple more seagulls. I feel the wind has veered and is coming from the north. In a short while, we must go back to face the Dragon of Wessex.'

'The Golden Man banner too.' he replied brushing off grass from his tunic.

'Yes and the Golden Man. I must tell you one day how those pennants came to be here. Would you untie Thecla and bring her to me?' he asked sporting a wide smile and passing him his hawking glove. Never before had Harold allowed anyone but himself to handle Thecla.

Cedric felt this privilege to personally handle the bird to be a passport to his father's heart and he strode off to where the hawk was impatiently waiting, ruffling her wings, untied the jess releasing to his arm the beautiful bird.

The next morning found the witan milling about the Great Hall, each waiting to have his personal audience with the king. First to be called was the great man, Brithnoth. Harold sat in a large room richly furnished with tapestries. In front of him was a table covered with maps made of pure white lambskin parchment. Upon these maps were the names of the largest towns and cities. The coastline and major ports depicted probable landing areas where either William or Harald might land, if they decided on invading England.

The light from large glazed windows bathed the room with almost perfect clarity. It was one of the few rooms that did not need the added assistance of lighted candles.

Brithnoth found Harold in deep concentration, surveying maps, oblivious to his entrance.

'Ahem.' Brithnoth made the usual apologetic noise.

Harold looked up from the table and his eyes lit up when he saw he old friend, and his face contorted into a huge grin, genuinely joyous to see an able friend and strode forward and embraced the old warrior.

'Here, please sit at the table.' but Brithnoth moved to sit next to a window.

'No, here, Brithnoth, next to the fireside. It's a cold north wind, and you look as if you need a good warming up.' Harold's greeting was warm and sincere,

but behind the budding smile, there was an earnest look in the king's eyes that Brithnoth knew was deep concern and knew he had to address and share in his friends problems 'We need to talk. It is most urgent that we speak, for you know the situation.' Brithnoth, acquiescent, moved to join Harold by the fire.

'Indeed, my lord, but I'm here for you to tell me what I don't know.' he said as he warmed his feet and hands by the roaring fire, listening intently as Harold spoke his mind.

'My lord?' Harold replied. 'You will address me as Harold. When we're alone you must call me Harold. For though I'm now your king, still, you are my trusted and dearest friend.'

Brithnoth looked a little embarrassed, but sensed Harold's sincerity.

'You mustn't treat me like I'm an old man, Harold. I could soon break your arms, even as large as you are.' Harold laughed and tapped him upon his shoulder.

'I never thanked you for your support, Brithy. Oops, sorry, I should address you as Brithnoth. You deserve my respect too, despite my rank.'

Brithnoth looked at him closely and noticed Harold was still deeply stressed. Harold only called him Brithy when he needed help, and it had been some time since he had done so.

Harold ushered him towards the table.

'You know we've received the formal embassies from Sigurdsson, and the bastard, too. Well, Swein, Gyrth, and I have, these last two years, been making plans to formalize a strategy to neutralize Edward's stupidity.'

Brithnoth rose from his seat and stepped forward, placing his gigantic and now warmed hands upon his hips. He gazed at Harold, determined to speak his mind.

'Edward was a snivelling, conniving bastard. He must have had ulterior motives of his own. Your father should have deposed him and taken the crown for the good of England.'

'Yes, he was and did. Edward resented my father's power and his influence with the common people. They would, as you recall, do anything for my father. As for Edward, well, they knew who they loved.' Harold sneezed and continued, smiling apologetically. 'The great man's hatred of Normans was well known, and justly so. Edward acted like a child throughout his life. My father actually thought of deposing Edward, but he was shrewder than that.' he moved toward a box that contained the written delegations from the three powers, removing only two that were of interest.

'Could I take a look at them?' Handed them, the old warrior perused the words with great interest, reading between the lines when he could.

'I would disagree, Harold. Sigurdsson had a great respect for your father, both as a man and a warrior. As for the bastard, well, he's too young to have done much in any case.' Brithnoth handed back the letters and glanced at the maps.

Harold ignored Brithnoth's remarks, which was something he rarely did with the man for whom he had so much respect.

'I'm procrastinating on the replies just now. We need to give ourselves some

time to construct a stratagem that might avert a landing by either Sigurdsson or that bastard, Forkbeard. At least long enough to strengthen the fortresses and to contact the local militias to be prepared for an imminent invasion.' Harold walked over to the window and stood looking out into the fields and the sea beyond. There was silence as Brithnoth once more perused the letters. Harold turned to speak, but hesitated for a moment.

Brithnoth looked up and stared at the wood panelling, sensing there was something amiss.

'There's also one more complication.'

Brithnoth moved his stare to Harold, and his eyes narrowed. Harold's phrase was unusual, one he rarely used. The old man began to look concerned. For a moment, there was silence, except for the crackling and spitting of the fire.

'And that is?'

Harold's gaze fell toward the floor and he took a pace forward. He leant both hands upon the table and slowly shook his head, despairingly.

'It's not going to be your day, Brithnoth. The bastard has been granted the full backing of the latest ecumenical thief, Pope Alexander. He's a fine, upstanding man who obviously feels there's something in it for him. I've some good people in Rome, so we know what the bastard doesn't as yet.'

Brithnoth grimaced, and his hands clenched tightly.

'Damnation!' he replied as anger took control of his facial muscles. 'This new situation puts an entirely different light on the matter. Pope Victor would never have given his approval. These popes either die too early or not at all. Convenience has never been a byword when it comes to popes, Harold. We have some serious thinking to do, my friend.' He walked towards the window and gazed out to the sea beyond.

Harold warmed his hands by the fire, rubbing them, then moved to sit in a comfortable chair. He smelled the burning cedar as it roared fiercely in the hearth. It reminded him of the times he had spent discussing tactics with his father within this very room.

'You have, I take it, consulted the bishops Stigand, Wulfstan, and Ealdred on the matter?'

'Yes, of course I have. They are of the mind that we stand firm. However, Stigand's own position is now fragile within the clergy, so I have offered him safe conduct to Rome, if he so desires. Unfortunately, he will have none of it, stating that the pope is dishonourable, and he should know. He told me that when he and Archbishop Ealdred went to collect his pallium eight years ago, Pope Benedict wanted to charge him for the privilege, saying that there were irregularities to his appointment, and that some considerable amount of money might just put things right. Can you beat that? Talk about greed. He paid him, of course, but he was not amused at the less-than-godly antics of both the Church and the Pope. I will tell you this, Brithnoth. No good will come out of any of this shit. For when we crush these bastards, the Pope will have lost all his money in a venture that could never have been a winner in anyone's eyes. He will refuse to pay the mercenaries, then the devil will arrive at his door; that much I do know. Europe will be in for one hell of a time. I'm only glad we have

the sea separating us.'

Brithnoth sensed Harold's intense worry at the prospect of the pope's inclusion, for it meant above all else, that Duke William would have the means to pay many mercenaries.

'The bastard could never pull it off, Harold; you know that. The one man we need to be concerned about is Sigurdsson. This problem we need to consider above all others. He could and would sail across to our shores. He has the men, the ships, the money, and the determination, if he so desires. What's more, your rightful, affirmed kingship aside, a reasonable claim, albeit a tenuous one, is the more serious threat.' Brithnoth massaged his brow and glanced toward his king, and noticed Harold nod in agreement.

'It's a long journey, though, one that would be treacherous, even for him. Sigurdsson would need a fleet with full armour and provisions, initially, for at least ten thousand fighting men. The logistics would be frightening. He would need to bring with him thirty thousand men in all. Farriers, along with the other ancillaries, etc., would boost his manpower needs and maintain his supply lines. The bastard, William, could never bring such a force, even if he had all the money in the world. No one would want to fight for him. I think we shouldn't ignore him, though. As for Sigurdsson, we need to seriously consider if, when, and where he'll come.' Harold replied as he studied the map.

'Indeed, Harold, and he will come sooner than we would like to think. So, what is the situation with regard to the two northern earls, Morcar and Edwin? They're both young and inexperienced, while Edwin is volatile. Have they been persuaded to ally with us?'

Harold hesitated for a moment. He looked pensive, his embarrassment shining like a beacon in the night, unsure about the reaction of his friend to the next words.

'Brithnoth, I have something to tell you. It is about Edwin and Morcar. I know you're not going to like this, but I have made an alliance with them.'

Brithnoth looked puzzled, knowing that both earls were pro-Scandinavian, neither having Harold's nor England's best interests close to their hearts.

'Err . . . last year, I wedded Ealdgyth, the earl's little sister; Gruffydd's widow. It was the only way I could gain and secure their support when the witan came to ratify my kingship. They were dead set on confrontation with us. In the event that we had a war on two fronts, we would surely lose if they chose to side with Sigurdsson, especially if we had the Norman duke on the other front. We would have been almost powerless to resist. I felt this efficacious in the light of the coming current situation. It'll buy us a great deal of time, if nothing else.' The old warrior sat staring at his king, his eyes searching Harold's face intently.

Harold wondered if Brithnoth would disapprove and explode in a plethora of negativism.

'What concessions have you granted them? Nothing too drastic, I hope.' Brithnoth said and couldn't help grinning. The thought that Harold had wedded a veritable child amused him greatly.

'None, as such, they need me just as much as I need their assistance. It is a

mutual alliance, though the brothers did need a little coaxing to get them to agree. They had to be told the truth of their position. That is, that Sigurdsson would throw them out; and they would become just like any other theow, digging turnips in the fields. It brought them round soon enough. It was, I felt, expedient to bring their sister here just in case they thought better of it and turned to Sigurdsson. They have been told of the recrimination that breaking this bond would engender if they were to cross me or stab me in the back. I also have their mother here. It was not a regular marriage, well, at least not in the eyes of God, at any rate. Anyway, I have made the terms ambiguous enough to allow some manoeuvring within the contract. Edith would have murdered me if anything other than that had been the case.'

Brithnoth laughed so much he could hardly catch his breath.

'Harold, you old dog, I knew you had it in you. You make an old man proud. Then you go and tell Edith. What did she have to say?' Holding onto the table, Brithnoth laughed, hardly able to contain the thought of Harold having to tell Edith Swanneck of the marriage.

Harold was feeling a little sheepish. He was so in love with Edith that it was apparent to all. She was the only woman he had ever truly loved. She had born his children, seven in all, their daughters, Gunnhild and Gytha, along with five sons--Ulf, Godwin, Edmund, Magnus, and Harold. He sought her advice on many matters that concerned the common people and how they were thinking. It was so important to him. She spoke in the vernacular and understood their problems.

Brithnoth stood to his full height and placed his arm around his friend. He knew Harold was under a great stress that was hard for any man to bear alone.

'She said that if ever I bedded this girl she would cut my balls off. Ha! Ealdgyth is only a child, for God's sake! However, Edith took it better than I expected. I have sent the girl off to a nunnery in Devises until I can do something about the situation in the future.' he replied with a wry smile.

Ushering Brithnoth towards the maps on the table again, he pointed to specific areas that were carefully laid out and marked with major locations underlined. 'Now, to business. I need your forces to be on full alert--here, here, and here. Can your newly trained forces and sailors be trusted to do their duty when needed?' Harold felt that he had let his friend down by not bringing him into his thoughts much earlier.

'They began training on the first day after the Easter holiday feasting. They'll harden up as the next few weeks go by, but I'll not let them go stale. They'll exercise with regular manoeuvres to keep them alert. Have no worries on that account.'

'There was never any fear of that, Brithnoth, but you need to fill them in fully as to our situation. That may grease their nerves for a fight, I'm sure. I wonder what my father would have done under these circumstances.'

'Your father would, likely as not, have sent a fleet to destroy the bastard, before he got a chance to sail here, but we have the extra complication of Sigurdsson. So, we are going to have to play this one by ear. If Sigurdsson and the bastard land simultaneously, could we contain both their forces?'

'I doubt it. I doubt, also, they would even communicate with each other. A

least William wouldn't entertain such an alliance. He is too greedy, even to share the air we all breathe, let alone divide England. So, realistically, it would all depend on who lands first.' he said, not sure if he fully understood the situation.

'I know the bastard's no way near ready. I'm, therefore, relying on Sigurdsson to land first.' Harold went on to insure that Brithnoth was knowledgeable of his fully funded provisions and that armament dumps would be cached in places along expected routes, covering both the north and south of England. Each man would also have had his allotted forty-two days military service in, as the law stated, and if not, then they were to bring last year's allotments up to date.

'Brithnoth, you need to rest after last evening's little gathering of the merry band of reprobates. You had better go see Cedric. The lad will see to your every need.'

'Thank you, Harold; you always are a goodly host. Your father would have been proud of you, lad. Err, I mean, sire.'

Harold chuckled and shook his head, placing his hands upon his hips.

Brithnoth grabbed Harold's arm, and bid him farewell, then ambled out the door with a shout to Cedric to come and serve him.

He looked out of the window. The wind seemed to whistle a tune, one that allowed him a momentary smile, for he loved combat, and always whistled before he dismounted his horse to do battle with a foe. He shivered. Statistically, He thought, all the gathered evidence for a winning fight for William is against the odds. His fleet is not as accustomed to the open sea as is Sigurdsson's. In the main, they're small fishing vessels. Harold's concentration was interrupted. A robin, perching upon the window ledge, chirped as if to attract his attention by showing off his red breast. It then flew off, startled, as a loud knock came from the already open door, disrupting his train of thought.

'Yes?' Harold called. At the door stood a tall man with short, curly, ginger-coloured hair and a servant by his side.

'There is a messenger, sire.' Harold turned around to see a face he knew well.

'Ulf, you old dog! It's been ages! Come, sit and tell me...what are you doing here?'

'My lord,' Ulf looked unbelievably sullen, 'I bring the worst news. Sigurdsson has taken York.'

Harold's face sagged in utter disbelief. "Oh, shit! When did that happen?" Harold's fists clenched as he took one stiff step towards the messenger of such horrid news.

'Three days ago, sire. He has Morcar and Edwin under his control. Worse than that, he has your brother, Tostig, advising him.' Harold tried with difficulty to control his anger. His eyes narrowed, his face contorting into an unyielding visage.

'Cedric!' The boy came running into the room, almost colliding into Ulf. 'Go tell Brithnoth to come back here at once. Along the way, have him call all officers to muster. You are to tell my scribes to attend me immediately. Is that

clear?'

'Yes, sire. What news, sire?' Cedric stood with his mouth wide open, expecting an explanation. Harold glared at Cedric sternly.

'Go, boy, go!' In a flash, Cedric fled through the doorway. He'd sensed the excitement and felt useful. His mind was racing, wondering what's was going on? The vividness of his imagination took hold as he ran after the great warrior, who was striding purposefully along the narrow corridor to the kitchens.

Ulf looked more concerned than Harold had ever seen him before.

'Tostig had been running about looking for allies, and he even paid a visit to Normandy! Word has it that he was told to clear off, and now, as you know, he's in Sigurdsson's camp.' Ulf searched the face of his king, looking for some sort of reasonable explanation for Tostig's actions.

Harold spoke softly, regretfully, and for a moment, almost apologetically,

'Yes, I'd heard he might have been making overtures to Sigurdsson. He really is a stupid man. I guess I ought to have had him back within our bosom, Ulf, but Tostig has never shown any remorse for his wrong doings.' his tone changed to one of determination. "Sigurdsson is no fool. He will use Tostig to his full advantage, and then discard him. Mind you, Tostig cannot tell truth from fiction. Sigurdsson might just have made a tactical error in taking him into his camp.'

'What do we do in the meantime, sire?' Ulf asked looking perplexed.

'Sigurdsson has landed three weeks earlier than I expected. Damn him! We have to march as soon as humanly possible. I would march in the morning if I could. Time is short, and the longer we wait, the stronger Sigurdsson's position becomes. However, we are not yet ready. We also have the deadline of harvesting the crops. Preparations are almost complete for staving off an invasion, but the men are not.'

'A long march to York?' Ulf asked who was waiting for orders as to his next assignment.

'We've no option. We have to take what men we have with us. As I've mentioned, the rest will have to stay behind and harvest crops. Sailing north is out of the question. By the time ships are assembled, we could be in York. In any event, we don't have the wind in our favour. A march is the only way forward. The men will be very tired when they reach York. This situation is not straightforward. Prudence, secrecy, and caution are of utmost importance.'

Harold motioned Ulf to take a seat by the fire.

'While we wait for Brithnoth, I want to know all that you've been doing since we last met. It's been quite a while since we last drank a glass of wine together.'

CHAPTER TWELVE

Harold led his horse out of the stable. It was a friend, his companion. Both rider and horse trusted each other implicitly. He looked down at the stable boy, Fredric, and patted his shoulder. He was a good lad, willing, too. Often he worked late into the night grooming the horses until Harold returned. Griffed, the under stable boy, looked on as his king conversed with Fredric.

'Are you ready for the saddle, Fredric?' asked the king, then noticed the boy's eyes were red and swollen. He'd obviously been crying. Fredric turned away, trying to hide his grief from his master. Placing his large hands on Fredric's shoulder, Harold turned him around.

'What is it, boy? Tell me. What is it that brings tears to your eyes? It's not like you to weep this way Fredric.' Harold looked concerned for the boy's distress.

'Osfrid was my friend, sire. He was a good person, and now he has been brutally killed. I miss him so much. I see him everywhere, as if his ghost were looking over me.' He pulled the boy close to him. Such a sweet boy, he thought, but is he tough enough to become a housecarl one day? Harold held the boy out at arms-length. Fredric steadied himself as a strong finger lifted his chin.

'The good Lord in Heaven is looking after Osfrid. No more harm can come to him. Just remember the goodness he had within his heart. You have taken his place, be strong, brave, and trustworthy. Be as he was. He will look down from the arms of Mother Mary and give you strength. You'll soon be a man amongst men. I've not forgotten my promise to you. You will soon be training with the housecarls. It's hard work and can be brutal in practice. Then you will become a member of an elite force of comrades that look after their own. They never leave a friend to suffer, because they're a family and brothers in arms.'

Fredric gazed deeply into the eyes of his king. He trusted him completely. Harold never lied to him or anyone; he knew the king was a man of his word.

The horse was becoming restless, eager to be outside. The beast gave a long snort that Harold knew meant impatience. Fredric was to ride the horse around the meadow behind the stable to warm and tone the beast's muscles. It had been Osfrid's job to exercise the king's horse, and this privilege now fell to Fredric.

Harold picked up a purple carrot from a basket. Giving one to his steed, he inquired of their origin.

'Tell me, Fredric, where did these roots come from?' he asked, knowing they were not grown in England. The ground was far too stony to grow them, and the soil too sweet. Fredric took a carrot from the basket and gazed at it for a moment. The horse snorted, reached out, and took the root from Fredric's hand. He smiled as he watched the beast devour the delicious root.

'Osfrid had someone give them to him, sire. The man came from Normandy. I believe they give these roots to special horses they breed there.' Harold dismissed the carrots for a moment and pondered on who it was that might have been undertaking the journey to Normandy.

'Do you remember the name of the man who gave the roots to Osfrid?' His curiosity was becoming almost intense. He had to be sure. He had to confirm Swein's information.

'It was a man called Eumer, sire. He was very kind. The odd thing about him was that he took a great liking to Toli. You know, your present from the Duke of Normandy. Eumer spent a lot of time here and would often ask about you and where you used to go when you rode out alone. I thought it a strange thing that he was always alone. Don't you think that was rather odd, sire?'

Harold's expression changed from a mild inquisitiveness to deep thought. For a few moments, there was silence, then returned his gaze toward Fredric, and once more placed his hands upon the boy's shoulders.

'In the future, I want you to inform Brithnoth or myself if anyone visits these stables that you've never seen before, most especially if it's someone who asks questions of you. Is that clear?' Fredric nodded as Harold patted the boy on his shoulder.

'Come along, now. Let's have her ready. I have things to do. Jump up, and go take her for a canter.' he said positively, and gave the boy a wink and a broad grin.

'Yes, sire ? if you could hold her still.' he replied struggling to keep the excited animal from stepping on his toes.

'Good. See to it that she's warm before she is brought out to the assembly point.' he replied, then walked back towards the castle entrance.

It was an imposing portal with a portcullis and a large, heavy drawbridge, the only one in England. At the base, the walls were fourteen feet thick and of solid stone masonry sloping inward from the base. The Romans had originally built the lighthouse nearly a thousand years earlier, and was an impressive piece of architecture. He thought of how his Saxon predecessors had added to the castle's structure from time to time. The sight of the great walls and the defensive earthworks always impressed him.

'He looked over his shoulder to see a group of men approaching from the north. The men looked strong and healthy, they were obviously housecarls, elite fighting men. As they came closer, he could see their gonfanon and recognized them as Gyrth's men. It's comforting to know I've had the strongest, bravest, and, above all, the best trained warriors in the whole of Europe. My own housecarls are a fine body of men, and willing to die rather than surrender to any force. They are masters of the art of combat and fearless, he mused. All were tattooed from the neck down, with dragons and angels being favourite motifs.

Brithnoth entered the courtyard and stood looking about for any sign of Harold. Not seeing him, he called for Fredric. He stood watching as the boy spun the horse around and trotted toward the great man. The sound of iron clad hooves echoed around the courtyard as Fredric approached him. Brithnoth smiled at the lad, but there was an obvious sadness conspicuous in the youth's demeanour.

'Fredric, where is the king?'

'I'm here, Brithnoth. I was having a few moments looking about-you know, inspecting the troops before we set off to York.' Harold replied as he appeared from behind the door, and greeted the old warrior with a hug. Harold had a wicked gleam in his eyes, for he knew he'd startled the old man.

'You almost gave me a stroke. I'm an old man now, no longer used to being taken by surprise. Do that once more, and I shall have to kill you in a most savage manner, Harold.' he grinned, but straightened when he noticed the serious look upon Harold's face. He wondered if he'd misread him, and saw that Harold was now in another mode. It was a look that he knew meant business, and he returned to continue his briefing in a professional manner.

'All our preparations are in place, but the prospect of a long march doesn't please the fyrd too much. However, as the saying goes; needs must when the devil drives, eh.' Harold placed his arm around his shoulder and spoke in a soft voice.

'This last episode, that is, the attempt upon my life, has become personal, Brithnoth, you know that. I know that the bastard was behind the attempt to kill me. As for Sigurdsson, well, this is a venture from which I may not return. You understand that Hardrada is a mighty foe. Yet I will do my duty to the end, to the best of my abilities, win or lose.' The old warrior stared deeply into Harold's eyes.

'You know your weaknesses, Harold. You also know your strengths. Look to them; they will drive you on to victory. If you die in the attempt to keep your country free from these evils, you'll have died a glorious death. No one can say that if you failed you did not fight a superb battle, Harold Godwinson. If you lose, and we are forced under the yoke of Hardrada, he will be our king. I, like others, though we wish it not, will have to accept him.'

The two men looked on as Fredric cantered around the field, turning the horse here-and-there, warming the horse's muscles. He patted the beast's neck as she jumped over a hurdle.

'Sigurdsson has no idea that we are marching north. Indeed, I have kept a tight reign on all information, because he thinks we are marching south to meet any threat from the bastard. What's more, he believes we'll agree to divide the country once he has taken hold of the Midlands. I'll let him come, and then I will cut off his line of supply. The man thinks he is King-bloody-Cnut. Well, have we a surprise for him!' Harold sported huge a grin, then chuckled softly.

'Do you think he'll fall for it, Harold?' he asked, scratching his chin.

'Only time will tell, my good friend. Tell me. Are the fyrd assembled in the fields below? The evening march will be easier for them as the sun would surely take its toll on men marching with all their equipment. Come along, old chap, let's go and eat our fill before we set off for the great adventure. We'll catch up with the troops in a short while.' Harold took his friend by the arm and led him inside.

As they moved off, Harold heard his officer's giving commands, to the troops in the field.

'Aweccan, waepnu nimth, forth-gath!' (Attention, raise weapons and forward march!), came the call from the sergeants. The fyrd moved in file, five abreast, for the long march to the north along Ermine Street, the old Roman road. Along the route, Harold sent out collectors to assemble men and their supplies. They were to join the troops on the long march north, preparing hidden supply dumps for the return journey, in case they had to return and fight Duke William.

The night marching made it better for the men to make headway along the old paved road. It was covered in a fine moss, and the short grass made walking easier. Each the morning the men set up camp. Harold had organized fresh food to be brought to the soldiers by local villagers. The men slept until nightfall, then resumed their journey. The army grew larger each night as more men joined

the troops from each village along the route. The morale was good, very good. Harold was their king and commanded a deserved measure of respect. He acted as though he was one of them. All knew what was expected of them. One man in the rear of the happy throng began to sing a boisterous melody that caught on with the rest as they marched.

'Liste, til deotha meadra. Sle eowere feonds, as cumbol forthegath. Deoth til urnum foendum Hardrada oll-stoppi, a day-raed. Onraes, Onraes, ha, ha, ha!'
(Listen to a man doomed to death. Kill your enemies, and protect the standard. Bring death to our enemy, Hardrada. He's an arrogant fellow and a great buffoon. Attack, Attack! Ha, ha, ha'). All night long, as the men marched onward, someone would add another impromptu chorus to the song until it grew to become as long as the march. Harold smiled with pride from the front of the marching retinue, setting the pace.

Gyrth turned to Harold and offered him a drink of water from a goatskin carrier. Harold took a long drink and returned the vessel.

'The men are in fine spirits, Harold.' Gyrth said with a smile.

Through the darkness, Harold noticed a rim of light, edging the blackness into a dark blue, the colour that presaged the process of dawn. A blackbird began a half-hearted attempt at a song that seemed to fall on deaf ears. The bird fluttered up to perch on a higher branch as the troops began to pass below, too close for comfort.

'As fine a bunch of men as ever wanted to die, Gyrth.' reported the king, solemnly, noticing that his own focus was becoming introspective.

'Steady on, Harold. We're here to throw Sigurdsson out, not to fail and die in the attempt.'

Harold pulled up his horse, leaned across to grasp the bridal of Gyrth's horse, then stared fiercely at his brother. An owl hooted a call,

'Tell us all-tell us all.' It seemed to cry.

'We're here to protect our freedom. Many men on both sides will die, some will live, and some will lose limbs. I'm sorry, Gyrth, war is an awful thing. We can never recover from our experiences; we just harden. We never forget our friends. We keep them in our thoughts and our hearts. We fight for them, as they fought and died for us.' He pressed his knees into his mount and rode on as the eastern horizon began to bring with it a raucous dawn chorus. Harold turned to Swein and asked that the men singing joyously behind, from now on, be silent.

As dawn broke, Riccall came into sight and Harold had his men set up camp and sleep while scouts looked for signs of Harald Sigurdsson's forces. Brithnoth approached Harold with news of the scouting parties that he had sent out the day before. Harold waited Brithnoth's advancing toward him.

'What news do you have for me, Brithnoth?' Brithnoth pointed towards the north west of their position, to a flat expanse of land with a river flowing between them and the enemy.

'Sigurdsson holds the land at Fullford Bridge. They're about an hour's walk in that direction. I would say they number about two thousand men, and, currently, they're poorly armed. They're Hardrada's men, all right, and there is more. Tostig is with a very tall man. I understand from my scouts that the man

can only be Sigurdsson. Yesterday, the local landowners were bringing whatever they own to the fields surrounding their encampment. Obviously, they were under orders to do so. It's my guess that today will be no different.'

'It appears that we now know what he is doing, Brithnoth." Harold turned around to gaze towards Leofwine and beckoned him to come closer. "Leofwine, I want the men to be fully rested and to keep quiet. There's to be no singing, is that clear?'

'Yes, Harold, I understand. Would you tell me what is going on? The men are going to want to know.' Harold and Leofwine both dismounted and seated themselves upon a fallen tree.

'It looks like they're collecting booty from the thanes. It would seem lots of cattle are being brought in to feed his men, too, and some sheep are being penned. It's quite obvious that they've not a clue we are here.' Harold looked towards Brithnoth with a wry smile.

'Leofwine, You'll take your orders from Brithnoth, who is going to take his orders directly from me. You are to do nothing with your men without the express permission or orders from him or from me. I'll call a meeting after we have rested and eaten. That way we will all be singing with one voice.' He patted his brother on the back, and they both got to their feet and parted, with Leofwine returning to his position amongst his men.

Harold began to wonder. This is the big one and I'm curious as to how long we might remain hidden. My boys are straining their leashes, he thought. He returned to be beside Gyrth and Brithnoth, who had dismounted and were now discussing the situation between them.

'Your scouts have done well, Brithnoth. Go thank them for their work, then have them get some rest. We're doing nothing until tomorrow morning.' he said, turning his attention toward Gyrth. 'It looks like we've caught Sigurdsson with his leggings down, little brother. Harold sported a braid grin and felt a surge of adrenaline, heightening his senses.

'Why ought we not to attack now, Harold? It could be a very different situation tomorrow morning.' Gyrth said, looking a little perplexed 'Come on, Harold, let's up and at them.' His excitement driven by his own untamed adrenaline rush allowed him to pull a smug face and hold a boxing stance.

The light had won the battle of a weakened night, and the birds were in full song. Bees and flies buzzed around, competing for the right to take the nectar from the now open flowers of the hedgerows. The air was still and the trickling noise of the river below Harold's camp was idyllic and tranquil. The men lay down to rest their weary legs, to drink water and sharpen their weapons. Their spirits were high and they didn't want to sleep, just to rest a little and to be at the enemy.

Harold sniffed the air and placed a hand upon the shoulder of his excited brother, calming him.

'The men need to rest for a while longer. They were marching all night and have not any sleep. We must have room to manoeuvre and with fresh men too, Gyrth. If all goes well, and we're not noticed we'll have them by their coddling hairs. I need to secure the troops. See to it that the fyrd do not wander off

and get captured by some scouting party of Sigurdsson's, or the entertainment will be spoiled.'

The king's orders were adhered to and carried out in silence. Brithnoth gathered the housecarls together and gave them orders to rest. What Harold says, he does for good reason, Brithnoth had said to his under-sergeants and other housecarls. He told them that in the morning to see to it that the men are all ready for battle, in full amour, their shields ready, and their weapons sharp. they'd going straight in. There would be no messing around. Brithnoth's tone gave away his excitement in anticipation of the coming conflict. He and then stood tall, leaving the others behind. He made his way to the edge of the road and looked across to the plains below, taking care to keep out of sight of any scouting parties and pondered the situation before. This will be tough, much tougher than many of us think, he thought. There must be many more ready to strengthen those troops down there. Where's their amour? He wondered. It can only be on their ships. If we move now, before we are seen, and take them by surprise we could obliterate them, and then we can be ready to fight their reinforcements. Surely and then, we would be victorious.

Leofwine and Ulf approached the great warrior, interrupting his private thoughts.

'They're hard men, Brithnoth, not easily fought.' Ulf commented. He stood next to him as Leofwine moved over to the other side of the great man.

'We need to be careful to keep our charges tight at all times.' Leofwine replied, and began sharpening his axe. He gazed at the old giant with admiring eyes. He loved this great man who had coached him to be a warrior. This wise man had become a brother and a Godwinson in all but name and would soon lead them, with Harold, to a great and wondrous victory. A fox wandered in front of them, stopped and gazed at the three men, and then moved away.

'Never underestimate your enemy, Ulf. I taught you that as a child. No matter what plans you lay down to direct an upcoming battle, you can never cater for the unexpected. An arrow will kill a king just as easily as it will kill a fyrdsmann. It doesn't discriminate. If you do as you're told, the likelihood of defeat will diminish. Nonetheless, remember what I have told you, always prepare for the unexpected. You'll be fighting tough warriors as brave as you'll ever see. Don't disrespect them. Despite their king's false claim, they'll fight to the last.'

'My boys know what they need to do.' Ulf said spitting on the ground. He'd accidentally swallowed a fly that had entered his mouth. 'The bloody things must be sodding blind. That's the third bug I've eaten this morning!'

'Boys! You are dealing with men, and you show disrespect to my housecarls, Ulf?' the old warrior sported a stern look, not tolerating of any description.

'Indeed not, sir.' Ulf bowed his head in shame. He'd learned a lesson in respect from the great man.

Under-sergeant Larch brought a message for Gyrth to attend Harold, but fell about laughing at Ulf's facial grimace.

'If Ulf stopped eating shit, the flies would leave him alone.' Larch muttered to himself.

'I heard that, Larch. I'll shit in your face if I catch you, you turd-faced toad.' Ulf said grinning, broadly at Larch's humorous remark. For once Brithnoth ignored this humour and gazed on, deep in thought.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Harold rode to a high point where he could see the enemy's position clearly. He stared down upon Harald Sigurdsson, the mighty Hardrada, King of Norway, with his men arrayed in the field, taking booty from the populace who had travelled from afar, to attend under threat of death. Harold felt aggrieved at the rape of his people. Sigurdsson was like a seven-year-old, taking the sweets off other children. He despised selfishness and bullying, and spat upon the ground.

'That bastard is robbing my people. Well, Sigurdsson, you're going to play with some real hard folk.' Harold said, seething through his teeth. He gazed out farther along the ridge as his thoughts drifted from his planned tactics to his contumacious brother, Tostig. All the silly fool had to do was behave, nothing more, he thought. He will come round when he sees me, and our brothers will embrace him. How do I find him, though? He brushed away a nosy fly that seemed to have fallen in love with his face. In a bush beside him, a blackbird sang a merry tune. 'Thank you, little fellow. Was that song just for me?' He nodded in acknowledgement, then turned his horse about and moved slowly off the ridge. He found himself pulled from his thoughts by the voice of Gyrth who had ridden up beside him.

'Huh! Ah, Gyrth, where is Swein? I need him beside me. I thought I had told you that you are to stay beside Brithnoth throughout the day. There are to be no deviating from my orders, or we might find ourselves in deep trouble, is that clear? Now, what is it you want?'

'We should be on the other side of that river, Harold.' he said looking rather disappointed with the view below. They both dismounted and looked at the bridge, where a single man stood alone guarding the narrow crossing that was the only safe passage over the high-banked, deep and slowly flowing river.

'The advantage of surprise lies with us, and that's the way it has to remain. In any case, as soon as we knock out that guard by the bridge we across, we are in the field. We can then mop up this lot and see what else there is to do.' Harold remounted and stood high in his stirrups, trying for a better view of the bridge through the trees.

Ulf ambled over to where Harold and Gyrth were discussing the situation. In one hand he carried a heavy, two-handed broad axe, in his other hand he held a sharpening stone. He slid the stone deftly from one side of the blade to the other, adroitly honing his instrument of death.

Harold glanced toward Ulf, but his thoughts were elsewhere.

'So many decisions, so many things can go wrong- um? What is the best approach?' he said thinking aloud, searching for input on how he could best take the bridge without giving away their presence.

'That guard looks a big fellow, but the only guard about, from what the scouts tell me. I think we ought to take him by stealth, in the dark. That way, we will still have the element of surprise in the morning. Ulf, I want you to go

take a closer look. I need to know what the land looks like up close. See if we can cross elsewhere, unseen and in good order. That bridge is really a bit too narrow to get us all across quickly.' he said, as he again took another look at the disappointingly inflexible crossing.

'Yes, Sire. I'll be as quick as I can.' Ulf spun about and made his way, quickly, down towards the river, keeping low and blending in with his surroundings to take stock of the situation.

Harold dismounted, and he and Gyrth strolled back to the main group to see the various generals sitting in a circle discussing Brithnoth's thoughts with him. As they approached, they all stood up and came to attention.

'Gentlemen, please, resume your places.' The men all seated themselves in a circle to hear what their king was to say to them. He looked around the group of highly motivated men, all experienced housecarls, each straining at their leashes, yet patient enough not to rashly rush into situations that could jeopardize their advantage. 'My plan was to rest the men and to attack first thing in the morning. I've had second thoughts, and I know it's against my better judgement, but we will go in now.' He gazed toward Brithnoth hoping for a nod of approval from the old warrior.

'There is a problem with our crossing the bridge. The route across appears to be the only one we have. The banks are too steep to clamber up, and Sigurdsson's forces would attack and defeat us if we tried to cross the river any way other than that bridge. Are the men all assembled and ready, Brithnoth?' Harold was tense. He was relishing the thought of facing Harald Sigurdsson on an equal footing. He wanted to look the man in the eye, and have a bloody king-to-king encounter. In the name of his father, he was going to have glory, and Sigurdsson was going to have hell.

'We're ready to go.' Brithnoth replied, but sensed Harold's thoughts were elsewhere.

'Harold, are you alright?' Leofwine lent over and shook Harold's arm.

'Huh? Yes, fine, I'm just fine. What is it?'

'You asked if the men were ready, Harold.'

'And are they?' He shook himself out of his reverie and felt more serene, fresh, sharp and on top of every feeling and emotion. I'm going to crush Sigurdsson, crush him, he thought.

'Yes, sire, exactly as you requested, not a man is out of place.'

'Right then. We are going to remove the man on that bridge. See that it's done immediately Brithnoth, so that we can cross it in short order, and we might never have such an opportunity again.' The men hurried off to gather and inform the fyrd of the good news, while Brithnoth gathered his officers together and explained what was to happen.

'Line the men up by the ridge. We're going in now.' The housecarls came quickly to the brow of the ridge, their shields shining in the morning sun. Each man knew what his task was and knew how to back up his kinsman, when to defend, when to attack, and when to retreat. They were housecarls, professional soldiers, the best in Europe, strong of will, steadfast, loyal, courageous men of honour, they were going to do bloody battle and they were loving the thought.

In the fields below, Harald Sigurdsson rode out with Tostig by his side. Harald's fighting men were ushering the burgers and thanes to deposit their riches in one giant heap, each man eyeing up his potential share of booty.

From a short distance away came a call from one of Sigurdsson's guards. Harald turned around in the saddle to see the man running towards him.

'Sire, look!' came a call from a man who was now breathless and pointing towards the high ground a thousand or so paces away. Harald rode forward to get a better view.

'Tostig, get your arse over here right now! Who is that on the ridge? I don't want any bullshit. Do you recognize that gonfanon?' He grimaced at Tostig, menacingly. 'Tostig!

'Oh, hell! It's my brother, Harold.' Tostig's face draining a bloodless white.

Sigurdsson called down to the man. An earnest, yet excited look.

'Have a man saddle a horse. I want him to take a message to Eystein Orri. Tell the messenger to have him here as soon as he can, to bring all his forces, with full armour. He then turned his gaze towards his Saxon companion.

'Now is the time to prove your worth.' Sigurdsson had to make a stand with what he had, and stall for time to allow Orri to arrive to reinforce him. The Norwegians were deplete of armour, but they had enough warriors to make a fight. From Sigurdsson's right there was movement and in the distance the sound of screams that men make when disembowelled, filled the air.

'What's going on there, by the bridge, Tostig?' Sigurdsson asked not able to making out what was happening he asked, his vision inefficient at such distance.

'The berserker guard is fending off Harold's men, sire.'

On the bridge, the berserker guard swung and struck again-and-again, bringing down yet another Saxon fyrdsman on the bridge that was just wide enough for only two men to cross side by side. The warrior's eyes were wild with pent-up rage, knowing at any moment he would be dead. For his king and comrades a berserker would do his duty until death. His companions needed the time that he could give them that would allow them to regroup and to array themselves into battle order.

Harold was frustrated, and saw that Gyrth was in need of a way around this berserker guard. Harold spied a small boat that was tied to a minute landing stage.

'Gyrth, use the boat.'

Gyrth glanced back at Harold and raised a hand. Gyrth beckoned two fyrdsman in his retinue to come forward and to take orders for a special mission. He told them to get themselves into the boat, and gave orders for them to spear the guard from beneath the bridge, and that the task was to be carried out immediately lest they were going to be detained here all day, otherwise.

'For God's sake, Gyrth, hurry. We'll end up getting killed one by one if this affair isn't terminated immediately.' he bellowed, but he sensed the two fyrdsman understood what was required of them. With fascination, Harold watched as the men scrambled aboard, and untied the vessel some hundred paces or so up stream. They paddled along with the flow of the river, keeping a slow yet steady pace.

The boat, in an ungainly fashion, came slowly toward the bridge, the first man steering with a paddle, the second man stood upright with the spear ready to do its bloody work from beneath. Not a word exchanged between them, as they neared the crazed berserker, who was still flailing his deadly battle-axe back and forth at his attackers, oblivious to what was beneath him. As the boat passed underneath and with careful aim, the fyrdsman thrust the spear through the slats of the bridge and into the groin of the berserker above. The man, in agony, lost consciousness and fell over, dead. The fight was finally over, but not before twenty good men lay dead at his feet.

'Sergeant, clear the bridge, and get across. Go-Go!' Gyrth bellowed irritably. Harold rode across first, and in just a few moments he was up the bank on the other side, and saw that the Norsemen now arrayed in battle order. Harold felt disappointed that they had lost so much time at the crossing, and saw that the Norsemen made a full circle countering the flanking attack that he wanted to make.

Ulf rode to Harold's side and then looked up the gentle slope.

From the left Harold saw two men on horseback approach them, and turned to Ulf who was sitting quietly observing the scene.

'You don't have to tell me. I know my own brother, when I see him. If I could persuade him to come back into the fold, we could possibly settle this dispute in an orderly way.'

Ulf sat in the saddle, taciturn, and observed what was transpiring in front of them. The two riders slowly wound their way towards them. Tostig rode his white pony, with Hardrada sitting astride a huge and handsome looking destrier mare. The two men stopped just a few paces away from them. Harold leant forward then spoke in a determined yet controlled tone toward his contumacious brother. He turned his head to gaze into the face of Harald Sigurdsson, but then returned to look directly into the face of his brother, Tostig.

'So, Tostig, are you going to come over to us? You can have your earldom and half the northern shires, too, if you return to the family and fight with us. You know well enough that I will keep my word.'

Harold stared into Harald Sigurdsson's eyes and sensed the power of the man. He knew he could more than meet his strength in arms and courage, yet he did not underestimate Harald's valour, ability or skill. He returned his gaze once more towards his brother. With pleading eyes, he implored him to cross over to him.

'You bastards kept me from my Edward, so you've no chance of my embracing you -bastards!' The unyielding contempt in his brother's face disturbed him.

'Harold. If you think I brought this king here just to betray him, then you are wrong. What would you offer him in return for a peaceful settlement?' Tostig stood up in his saddle.

Harold did the same, in defiant gesture.

'This is no time for family rows. I am here to clean my kingdom of an invading king and his army of disrespectful and thieving vagabonds. You can tell him that I'll give him seven feet of earth or as much taller than he is above other men.' Harold replied indignantly, moving his gaze to Sigurdsson. At this, Tostig signalled to Hardrada that the parley was at an end.

The Norwegian king turned his horse about, and Tostig followed him up the slope toward the Norwegian troops.

'Well, what happened?' Sigurdsson asked inquisitively.

'There is to be no compromise. We must be prepared to do battle at once, Sire.'

'You've not told me, Tostig. Who was that man with the moustache?'

'It was Harold, my brother, of course.'

'Tostig, why didn't you tell me? I'd have killed him there and then, if I'd known.'

Harald and Tostig rode back until they reached the circle of men where the standard of Sigurdsson, the Land-Ravager, flew tall in the centre of the circle. They dismounted, then patted their horses, and watched as the animals ran off the field. Cheers for their king rang out from amongst the Norwegians. The two men now entered the circle to await their fate.

Harold understood that though Harald's men were not fully armoured, each of Sigurdsson's men would stand their ground and fight until they were successful, or die fighting to the last man, if they had to.

The Saxon king signalled to Brithnoth to start his move, and the Saxons moved in quickly, flanking, and eventually surrounding the Norsemen, with shouts and jeers. The housecarls and fyrd stood by their sergeants and awaited their orders. Brithnoth called out his orders.

'Aweccan! Guth raew filciath! Stand faeste! Waepnu nimth as Abideth bebob!' (Attention! Form the battle line! Stand firm! Raise your weapons and await the order!) Brithnoth looked towards Harold for the command. As in oft times of old, the Saxons always fought on foot, so Harold dismounted, he would fight standing side-by-side with his men.

The silence was deafening, and the men tense. Not a word heard, just the Birds, unaware of what was to come next, chirped.

Harold's strides were forceful and his demeanour menacing. He moved toward the Norwegians and broke the silence. He spoke clearly and loudly in the Norwegian tongue.

'My name is Harold. I am king of this fair country which you seek to take as your own. I give you fair chance to return to your ships, your wives, and children; you will have safe conduct. Stay, and you will die where you stand.'

In unison, a roar of defiance came back. 'Cifesborren!' (Son of a whore!) jeered all from the ranks of Sigurdsson's men.

Harold called out the order to attack. 'Oraes!' Brithnoth repeated Harold's call. 'Oraes!'

The Saxon lines moved in with spears and axes, cutting and thrusting. The lines of Norse warriors stood firm, yet they fell one by one, in man-to-man, hand-to-hand fighting. Men with scramseax and two-handed battle-axes took turns to stab and hack each other to pieces. The Norwegians, with so little armour and too few shields, countered with a fierce resistance that any soldier would be proud of. Heads rolled off shoulders, arms sliced off as axes swung viciously. Swords swiped and thrust on both sides, giving and taking no quarter. They fought as men possessed by devils, each the focus of the other. The cries of

pain never noticed. Only the anger of men in the heat of battle suffered, as they ferociously hacked away at each other, oblivious to all except their personal survival at any one moment. The blood of the dead and dying washed the field up to the ankles of those still standing. The spilled intestines of sometimes men still alive caught in the feet of those reaching for glory, often being entangled in the gory, filth ridden organs, causing them to fall allowing them to be hacked down from above. The strewn brains of once brave warriors made the ground slimy as if walking on a field of jelly.

Sigurdsson stood firm next to his Land-Ravager standard waiting for Eystein Orri to arrive, hopefully soon, with armour and fresh troops, but they were at least three hours away.

Just thirty paces away, King Harald Sigurdsson espied Harold, King of the English in the thick of the battle, cutting down all before him. Harold Godwinson noticed the Norwegian king. Godwinson stared briefly in fierce defiance, when both men made a swath toward the other, hacking and cutting their way free, each trying to make a route to the other so that they could fight it out personally.

A hail of arrows filled the air from the Saxon forces as the killing continued apace. Having no recognition of friend or foe, the arrows pierced the flesh of both sides indiscriminately.

Sigurdsson was grinning, clearly enjoying the hand-to-hand fighting, taking the lives of brave men as they fought to subdue him. He sang as he swung his mighty battle-axe, spurring his personal bodyguard to further efforts of bravery.

'Odin will see you in Valhalla. His housecarls will welcome his brave new warriors. The fields green, and pain, hunger and strife will no longer taunt you. Riches abound for the bravest of you.' the Norwegian king sang as he cut down yet another Saxon.

Sigurdsson once more espied Harold, just ten paces from him.

'Come and meet my beloved blade, usurper. It's wanting to taste your blood!'

Harold fought fiercely, cutting down the Norwegian housecarls, his lungs filling with the expired air of the dead and dying. The stench of blood and intestinal contents went unnoticed, making steady progress towards Sigurdsson.

In the blue cloudless sky, an arrow flew, spinning, as if its trajectory and destiny assured as it fell earth-bound. The arrow struck its target; it was the end. Sigurdsson clutched his throat in shock, his hands fumbling to pull out the arrow, but it was too late, his jugular severed and he fell to the ground, dead.

Sigurdsson's housecarls fought on until the last man stood, only to be hacked down by a Saxon housecarl in a fierce hand-to-hand fight that saw both men die as their axes sliced through each other simultaneously.

Harold, breathless, gazed about the carnage to see the butchered remains of the many thousands that lay dead and dying before him. He dropped to his knees and crossed himself.

'We have the field! We have the field, a glorious victory!' Brithnoth bellowed.

Harold was so relieved they had defeated the mighty Norwegian king.

Brithnoth, covered in the blood and the gore of other men's intestines, approached him. Both men were exhausted, and together, they gazed upon the slaughter before them, and saw that so many of their best warriors had fallen. They gazed about realizing that they had lost too many friends. Brithnoth embraced his king, more to comfort him for their losses than for their victory. Harold turned to the men left standing; most bent double, taking in deep breaths of stench-filled air.

'Brithnoth, we've defeated the greatest army the world has ever known. It was our good fortune to have caught them without their full arms and shields. Yet I fear the battle is not over yet, for I know there will be more enemies on their way here.' Harold said breathlessly, yet full of elation, until an odd feeling overcame him; the scene was surreal. Harold shook his head and returned to cerebral normality, feeling relieved that he was not dead.

'My lord?' Brithnoth replied with an inquisitive look.

'Come on, Brithnoth; get a grip. The lack of shields and the poor equipment they carried was not their usual manner. We caught them off guard. Soon we will engage the rest of Sigurdsson's forces. They will come that way, from the ships on the Derwent. We must rest and then prepare for the next round that is sure to come.' Harold said looking unsure about what to do next.

'I know this territory well, Harold. If the rest of Sigurdsson's forces are moored at the mouth of the Derwent, and I suspect they will be, then they have a full morning's walk to reach us, and it's all up hill, too. The day is hot, and they will have full armour and that of their comrades to carry for the men who now lie dead here. We are bloodied and ready, with fire in our bellies for a fight.'

'By the rounds of Odin's balls, you're right! Muster the men. Get them rested, and then prepare them for another attack from the left side. Take your best men to the ridge, hide below the other side, and we will surprise their forces with an attack from the rear. My housecarls will lure them in with a feigned retreat then backtrack to crush them. They'll have no escape, except to the river.' An inspired idea came to him and his mood changed.

'You're not my king for nothing, my lord. Look, here comes Ulf, and he's grinning as though he has found a gold coin too!'

'He was eight years old when I last saw him grin. He crapped in my porridge. I should have killed him stone dead. However, I had my own back. I had a turd inserted into his sausage.' Harold recalled gleefully, and they both roared with laughter, almost falling to the ground in stitches with glee.

'What's so funny? Has someone found out we fought the wrong army or something?' Ulf asked, totally bemused.

'Had any sausages lately?' Brithnoth enquired falling about and hardly containing himself with his laughter he fell to his knees guffawing profusely.

'My lord, what is Brithnoth mumbling about?' Ulf asked pointing towards Brithnoth. He removed his helmet and scratched the back of his head. Harold fell to his knees beside Brithnoth in laughter, unable to contain his amusement.

'Turd, turd, turd.' he mumbled in Harold's ear. The laughter continued for a full minute, before at last they were able to raise themselves to their feet.

'Oh, its nothing.' Harold replied, winking toward Brithnoth who was trying hard to raise himself from the blood sodden earth.

Leofwine, Swein and Gyrth ambled over to where Harold stood.

'Ah, my esteemed brothers, I'm pleased to see that you're all safe. Is anyone here injured?' he asked, and since his brother's were unhurt, continued.

'Now we have another problem.' he said, and filled in the details to them of what was to come.

'I'm sure we could cope with a second attack, but we need an hour's rest.' Ulf replied.

'I feel the moment we see the enemy, the attack should begin whether we are rested or not.' Brithnoth growled.

'They've no idea what has taken place here, motioned the king, 'or of the outcome. They will be in good heart and ready for a fight. I will tell you what. I have an idea, and it just may work as a lure. Ulf, you take the Land-Ravager, and place it and your men in the position over the bend in the river. They will head for their own pennant. That way, their route of escape will be only towards us. You and Brithnoth will be blocking the other two exits out. They will only have the river as an escape. Keep yourselves hidden behind that ridge Brithnoth, and listen for the trumpet call. You will then come down with all force. Is that understood?'

'That should work.' Ulf replied, sure in the knowledge that Harold's plan would lead them to a second victory.

'Indeed it should.' Brithnoth said looking confident.

'We will have these turds for supper. Ulf said, matter-of-factly. Harold and Brithnoth both fell to their knees in tears on the grass, laughing.

'I'll go get the men sorted out.' Ulf said, with a puzzled look. He walked off, still not understanding the joke.

'You know, Swein.' said Gyrth. 'One day, someone will explain all of this laughter and falling about.' He shook his head slowly as they turned about and ambled away.

Swein and Gyrth moved gingerly through the bodies into open ground further away from the battleground. As they did so, they gazed up at the star with the tail that was still barely visible, when he almost tripped over an unseen obstacle.

Swein gazed down and saw a body with an arrow through the base of an unprotected head. The man was well dressed and obviously a nobleman. Curious, he rolled the body over.

Gyrth, look who is. It's Tostig!' he exclaimed with a look of suppressed anger about him. Gyrth knelt down to take a closer look at his deceased brother. 'What's he doing here, Swein?'

'He was trying to escape, of course. The chicken-livered shit! He is no brother of mine. If asked, you couldn't find him, is that understood?' Gyrth understood well enough.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As the hot morning sun beat down upon his head, the messenger laboriously made his way through the wet marshlands, fighting off flies and insects that bit

his every being. He arrived at the ships, sought out and found Eystein Orri sharpening his weapons on a revolving stone. Eystein looked up to view the messenger, quizzically.

'Sir, Harold Godwinson has engaged the king in battle. The king requires you to come at all speed with your armour and weapons.' Eystein's jaw dropped, and he stared at the messenger in silence. He jumped to his feet and called to all the men under his command to attention. He repeated the message and ordered a general muster. To a man, they were eager to engage the Saxons. A roar emanated from the Norse housecarls who'd been sitting about on the ships idly waiting to serve their king. Dropping their rope repairs, leather cutting and bone carving, they almost fell over each other in an attempt to get off the ships.

'Gather your shields and weapons. We will be off to do battle at once.' he bellowed. 'Sergeants, see to it that your men are ready to march immediately. It's going to take us a while to get there, so bring plenty of water. This heat will do us no favours if we don't drink our fill. This is going to be a long march, and what will we find when we arrive only Odin can know.' The men didn't need any coaxing as they gathered themselves together, ready to march.

Eystein thought of Maria. He could almost feel her sweet lips upon his. He wondered, too, why the king had made him his heir and disinherited his son, Olaf, and why he'd given him Maria's hand in marriage. She would be his queen one day and give him many sons.

He gazed about, searching for the man who was to be his backup. He sought out the lazy prince.

'Olaf, for the sake of Odin, where are you?'

Olaf was gazing at the birds above him, bathing in the warm sun and taking pot shots at them with a catapult. He sat up and called back to Eystein as he rested himself on an oar while chewing on a blade of grass.

'I'm here, Eystein. I've brought down two seagulls. I've a good eye, and I'm a dead shot, too.'

Eystein clambered up the side of the flagship to gaze into the eyes of the young prince. 'Did you hear the news Olaf?'

'Yes, of course. Father will be all right. He just needs a back up to make sure we're in full control of the situation. He'll knock the shit out of that dumb arsehole Godwinson. I would not even bother going, if I were you. The battle will be over and won, by the time you arrive, so what's the point?' He took another shot at a seagull, but missed. Eystein glared at him and could hardly believe his ears.

'Did you hear me, Olaf? The king has next to no armour and only half the men he needs to make battle. Look? you stay here, in case the very worst happens. I want you to be ready to sail.' he said with a hint of exasperation.

Olaf shrugged, and he lay on his back to soak more of the sun's warmth.

'That's fine by me, Eystein. You go and get your head chopped off, since you are the warrior. I'm just a prince of the realm. What do I know of such things?' Eystein wondered why he should feel so puzzled at his friend's apparent flippancy, when a change of expression came over his face. No longer was Olaf his friend. Eystein was the Norwegian king's successor and Olaf a dolt.

'Stop bugging about, Olaf! This is serious stuff. Your father is obviously in deep shit and you make light of the situation.' He turned away, his contempt for Olaf obvious.

'Are your men ready?' he called to his sergeants. He needed no reply. He marched around to the front of his troops and stood looking at the men under his direct command. A young boy brought him two shields, and spare coat of mail armour with two swords. He saw that his men had gathered their armour and spares for their comrades on the battlefield and were ready to reinforce his king.

'Well then, let's make a move. We're going to show Godwinson just who is the stronger force.'

The men walked for nearly three hours across country to save time, not following the route taken by the king. Carrying their armour plus extras for the men ahead, his men were sweating profusely in the sun. The flies buzzed and were a constant irritant, and the mosquitoes stung their skin. Hot and bothered, but ignoring the insects, they trudged onward. There wasn't a tree, or any shade to be had.

The reinforcements stopped here and there to drink water. Many of the men used their shields to protect themselves from the sweltering heat, but they carried on regardless, they were housecarls, proud men of honour.

At last, they reached the site of the previous battle. Eystein gazed around him, and he saw that all was quiet, too quiet; it was almost eerie. He stopped the advance, and took stock of what he saw before him.

What happened? He wondered. There must be signs of life somewhere, he thought. He moved further forward, and, over a small hillock he noticed a very large formation of warriors around the Land-Ravager banner. He smiled at the sight of Sigurdsson's pennant, then his smile became a grin as he turned to admire his warriors.

'We're in time. Follow me to the Land-Ravager.' he joyfully ordered, his arm pointing in the general direction of the standard. The young commander had his men grouped in files five abreast as they marched forward. Eystein, a little ahead of the force came across a mound of bodies. He looked at them, but he couldn't distinguish one body from another, thinking they were Saxons slaughtered by his king's valiant housecarls. He ushered his men on moving forward toward the gently flapping Land-Ravager. Only then did Eystein realise they had been tricked. The corpses they had passed were all that was left of Sigurdsson's poorly armed infantry. It was too late though, as a superior force that had full advantage of the land and the situation surrounded them. Eystein cursed himself, that given good intelligence ahead, he wouldn't have fallen into this trap. He gasped, knowing he and his men must now fight a defensive battle of survival.

A trumpet sounded, and with a rush, Brithnoth's force came from behind the bank and stormed down the slope towards Eystein and his warriors. Ulf and his men threw down the Land-Ravager and marched toward Eystein's heavily armed, but meagre battalion, which by now was quickly taking a defensive stand.

Eystein saw Harold's forces coming from the front, cutting off any forward movement or escape.

'Form a circle, lock shields, and keep tight.' Eystein instructed, his face, sporting a look of deep concern, then contorted to a vengeful anger. He watched as the shield wall began to form around him. His men knew that they had no option but to fight to the death. Capitulation was not an option.

The Norsemen began to chant, their natural fears put aside as the adrenaline pumped and flowed in the veins of each man. They began banging their shields, calling out their Norse mantras, working themselves into frenzy.

'Sergeants, keep tight at all times. No matter what happens we can get out of this, but we need time' he bellowed; full in the knowledge they were now surrounded. To surrender would mean disgrace for himself and all his men. It was a case of fight and die. It was as simple as that.

Slowly, the Saxon warriors moved forward to within feet of the shield wall tempting the men to rush at them and break the wall of solid interlocking shields. The taunts from the Saxons were echoed in kind by replies from the Norsemen behind the shield wall.

Harold thought the only option was to rush the wall with full weight and force, and they might, perhaps, break through, but he knew that was impossible, stupid even. He had an idea brewing--his grin was as wide as a barn door at the thought. He gathered some fyrdsmen to him and gave them particular orders. The chosen men then returned to the ranks. The two armies were now within a foot of each other, each force waiting for an axe or spear to be hurled that would signal the start of the battle.

Then, a few moments later, the Norwegians were astonished to see Saxon fyrdsmen clambering upon the shields of their brethren, standing above them. With a gush, streams of urine poured from above, soaking the men behind Norse wall of gleaming, polished shields. Up came a shield here and there to defend against the hot urine from the bloodied Saxon men above.

The Saxon housecarls rushed into the wall, breaching the defence with ease and with vigour.

'Stand fast! Stand fast!' Eystein called. 'We can defeat these men if we stand fast!' Eystein took a blow on the helmet from a sword but managed to fend off the next attack, killing the man before him with a straight sword thrust. For my king and Maria, I will fight unto the death. I will die with love and glory in my heart, he thought as he killed yet another Saxon with a thrust of his gleaming red blood soaked and weapon.

As before, the fighting began in earnest. The battle was frighteningly fierce as each man killed his nearest enemy, until at last some Norsemen were routed, making for a wide tributary, trying to cross to make their escape. The extremely tired defenders saw no good in dying for no cause, but the Saxons fought like sharks in a feeding frenzy. From around him, Eystein's men began to scatter too, but from every side they were being hacked down by Saxon battle-axes.

Overwhelmed, the rest of Norwegians took to the water behind them, only to drown as their armour and jupons became a soaking mass pulling them down. The river turned red with the blood of the dead and dying, wounded, and defeated Norsemen.

Eystein Orri fought on, until he, too, was brought down by a blow from a

Saxon battle-axe. His eyes bulged as the blow struck his chest, slicing through his mail armour, he fell to his knees. On his lips he uttered a choking Maria. As he gurgled, he saw his ancestors in Valhalla beckoning him to come to them. Then, from a second blow, his head rolled from his body. Eystein Orri had done his duty to his king. As he fell the battle ceased, and once more the ground was awash with the blood and intestines of lifeless Saxons and Norwegians alike.

Just as darkness was closing in not one of Eystein's men were left standing.

A few moans from wounded men of both sides dying or pitifully wounded, until finally silence reigned. Men were detailed to help the Saxon injured, to be eased away to have their wounds dressed.

Harold's housecarls mingled through those Norsemen still breathing and the slaughter continued as the living were put out of their misery by the cutting their throats, no matter how trivial their wounds. Crows swooped down picking at the eyes of the dead, followed by the seagulls and other carnivores.

Harold's men, fighters to the core, silently saluted Sigurdsson's housecarls; their fallen foe. Elated, Harold felt a sense of shame at the waste of good men on both sides. He looked about him, the ground crimson; not a blade of green grass could be seen. The carrion, in a frenzy of feeding, made some younger fyrdsmen feel sick at the sight of the carnage.

The sky began to darken further as the heavens opened and a downpour washed the field. Harold called to Ulf, who was making his way around, trying to identify his fallen comrades heard the call. Half-heartedly he strode toward his king. Ulf's head was bowed low, his thoughts somewhere else.

'Ulf! Go and see to it that Sigurdsson's men left on the boats be brought to the battlefield by first light. I have no idea how many there are, but you'd better take a hefty contingent with you in case there is any fighting to be done. Take the horses, and you should be there before midnight. Do not alarm them; that could be dangerous for you. Just call on them and tell them they have lost the battles and that their king is dead; that they must come as our prisoners. If there is any sign they might put up a fight, torch the ships.'

Ulf stood in the twilight pondering, looking overwhelmed at the thousands of bodies of good men who were wasted for a cause they could never hope to attain, all for the greed of one man who'd had it all anyway. Harold called once more.

'Ulf!?' Ulf was startled into attention and turned around. 'I'm sorry, Sire. My thoughts were with my men. What was it you were saying?' For a moment, he noticed Harold looked irritated with him. Brithnoth took Ulf to one side and briefed him on Harold's order. Harold strode towards the two men, feeling a little perplexed.

'What is the matter with you, Ulf?' 'Come on; spit it out, man.'

Ulf shrugged. 'I'm on my way, Sire. I'll see you at first light.' At that, he took off to round up the best of the rest of his men to accompany him to the enemy ships.

Brithnoth took Harold firmly by the arm.

'Harold, Ulf told me it was a shame we couldn't have taken these men south with us. They were brave warriors, a fit and formidable force well able to fill our ranks, and now that Sigurdsson is dead they could have been useful to us.'

I'm sure they would have been well rewarded, should they have been needed to battle alongside us in the future.'

'I'd thought of that, Brithnoth. Their leader was a young and dedicated man. He had a job to do and he tried, even if it meant in the end he had to die for his master. No amount of coaxing from us would have changed his mind. Neither would the men who fought with him have come to us. Those that ran were cooks and servants, not fighting men. I would have been proud to have such men in my ranks. Come along Brithnoth, we must leave the field and allow our men to rest for a couple of days. We have to secure York tomorrow, and I've plans to return to London. There are things I must do that only a king can do, and that is to secure the south coast in case there is an invasion from the bastard. Let's hope in this great victory he will be dissuaded from the stupidity of a landing upon our shores. If he does decide to oppose us, he will gain only as much of England as he is tall, just as Sigurdsson has been allowed. That reminds me. Have some men search out and bring Sigurdsson's body to our camp.' Harold sounded confident of his position, yet tiredness and fatigue drew him to kneel, wanting nothing more than to sleep. He shook off the symptom, and rose to have the old warrior grinning at him full in the face. He slowly shook his head and patted the old man's arm.

'I'll see our camp is set in an orderly fashion, Harold. Err- are you off to York just now by any chance? Or at first light?'

'You old devil Brithnoth. You want me to bring that wench, the Lady Amanda, back with me, don't you? She's probably married a baker by now. I'll see to it she is brought first thing, as soon as I arrive, Brithnoth. I won't let you down old man.' He stood grinning then mounted his horse and rode off in the failing light toward York.

Harold awoke to spasms in his legs and was in so much pain that he called for Cedric to help him in getting up from his cot. Should I drink more, he thought. He knew the signs of dehydration and he had ignored it. He caught a bright shaft of light, it shone through the window of his bedchamber and felt it was about to burn his retina. He glanced away, but he idly followed the beam making the dust dance like fairies and it fascinated him for a while until his pain returned.

'Damn! I hate cramps. I would rather have a tooth pulled by the bastard than these bloody spasms. I seem to get them more often these days, my boy. It's a sign of old age perhaps?' Cedric just smiled and called the chambermaid in to serve the king's breakfast.

'This will be the first decent meal you've had since we left London, Father.'

'You called me father, Cedric' Again the boy just smiled and left the room to the maid, and Harold to his breakfast. He sat at the table, gazing through the window wondering if there was to be any more fighting done. He wondered if anyone else, other than the bastard, would attempt to invade England after this ignominious defeat of Harald Sigurdsson. Would *bastard* really the attempt a crossing now that he had secured his kingship. He thought he might send a message to the duke warning him off. He fought against sending any message.

'Let the bastard come. He'll be surprised at our greeting.' he muttered. He

finished his meal dressed, then strolled over to the stables to mount his horse and to meet his brothers and generals, then set out to complete the previous day's work.

By noon, Ulf and Swein had assembled the ship's company of Norsemen outside the gates of York. The men of the fyrd were rested and a fresh guard was made up from Edwin and Morcar's battalions. They were brought forward to escort the prisoners back to their ships with a message that they should never return.

Olaf stepped forward and looked squarely into Harold's eyes.

'I wish to take my father's body to his homeland to be buried on the soil of his birth.' Olaf's arrogance almost cost him a punch, but the king resisted the temptation, instead a frown came upon Harold's face. He grimaced and spat the words out through his teeth.

'Your father will be buried as I promised, in seven feet of earth.' he said replied indignantly. 'I lost many good men and dear friends to your father's greed. The cost will be paid. You, my boy, will learn this lesson, and learn it well. England will be free of all foreign influence for the next thousand years. Go and tell that to your people.' With a wave of his arm Olaf was forcibly ushered outside to be escorted, along with his kin, to await the twenty-four ships allocated for their ignominious return to the land of their birth.

Olaf boarded the ship with his men. They weighed anchors, pushed off into the river and sailed down the brown tidal surge, negotiating the bloated bodies of their comrades floating along its banks. As the sun beat down, the smell of decomposing flesh entered the noses of the Norsemen, the stench made them retch.

Olaf glanced at the carrion picking eyes of dead warriors for their lunches. He winced as he saw foxes dragging off torn limbs of men who fought valiantly in vain for their king, only to be used as food for the wild beasts of England.

From the banks of the river, villagers looked on as the surviving Norwegians sang laments for their fallen comrades, and then sang of their wish to be in Valhalla with their king, friends and companions as they passed by.

Olaf ordered some of his fleet to land in the Orkney's to pick up Elizabeth and Maria, while he was to sail on to Norway in ignominy and shame.

A few days later, on the Isle of Orkney, Maria held her flowers to her breast, and smelled the pleasing aroma from their multicoloured heads. She looked to the shore where the seals bobbed and the cormorants dived to catch their fish, then sat majestically digesting their meal. She began to hum a tune that came into her mind. She felt little butterflies inside her tummy, she patted her bulge and smiled, then turned her gaze to the swallows swooping. She noticed a man approaching her some way off. As he got closer, she could see he was a housecarl, and by his demeanour that all was not well.

'No, don't come near.' she ordered. 'He is dead, isn't he?' Her eyes welled with tears as her head dropped to gaze at her pregnant, swollen belly. The housecarl nodded.

'They're all dead.' he whispered.

The flowers dropped from her hand. Her tears fell in rivulets down her cheeks as she stood looking towards the shoreline, where she and her beloved Eystein Orri once made love in the grass. She walked slowly toward the water and into

the sea, to be with her man.

The last of the real Vikings were dead, never to be seen again.

CHAPTER FIVETEEN

Alan sat against a tree eating a leg from a chicken Philippe had caught and cooked. He idly gazed to the hills that looked menacingly steep and high. The trees, with their deep green canopies, held millions of starlings that swooped low in perfect formation, gathering insects from the rich soup beneath them. He tried to count them, but it was impossible. He noticed a wild boar roaming the carpet of leaves trying to nuzzle out sweet roots from the earth and listened to the choruses of songbirds that filled the air with the magical sound of life. The smell of wood burning fires reminded him of their home before the Norman attack. He was enjoying the peaceful tranquillity; it was a far cry from the excitement that brought them to be working for the enemy. Then he noticed the breeze had changed direction, and a light blue smoke haze from the fish smoking huts permeated the nostrils of all living creatures that dwelt in and around the port of Dives-sur-mer. He dozed off, dreaming of life back home.

Philippe was seated on a Hessian sack filled with horsehair. He gazed out to the sea far beyond the shoreline wondering if the next crossing would be as easy as the first he and Alan had made.

'I've been thinking about our trip to England, Alan. If it were not for Snap, we could have spent a few more days in England. We never got to taste any of their food or ale. Even though our party was ordered to leave by Earl Leofwine, I'm sure we could have made some viable excuse to hang on there a day or two.' He smiled to himself and then glanced up as he noticed movement. He saw a group of men in the distance approaching their way.

'Hey, Alan, this looks like the duke. We'd better look as if we're busy, or we'll be in deep trouble for lazing about.' He gave Alan a light kick with his boot. 'Did you hear what I said? We've company. We ought to be seen doing something.' Alan awoke with a start. He got to his feet rubbing his eyes and gazed in the direction of his brother's pointing finger. He scratched the back of his head, then began brushing off the grass and other bits from his tunic.

'It's the duke and his pal, Roger Fitzscrob.' Philippe said, whose vision by far the sharper of the two. The brothers moved out of sight and watched as the two riders approached.

As the men reached the lodge, William leaned towards Roger, their horses noses snorting loudly, almost touching. He smiled broadly at the man who was, along with Walter Giffard, the most faithful amongst all his entourage. William grasped his arm as they halted in front of the damaged building.

'What day is it, Roger?' William asked as if disorientated.

'It's Wednesday, the first day of August, Sire. It's the day of St Hope.' Roger glanced skyward. 'And it's going to be a fine day too.' he said smiling, feeling confident that all would go well, and that William knew exactly what he was doing. 'The lodge looks a mess, William.' he said with a forlorn look.

When they arrived at the stables they dismounted, their horses led away by the grooms.

Robert and the duke strolled over to inspect the damage. The lodge, though not a particularly large building, was comfortable, and, through lack of regular occupation the interior smelled musty. William had ordered that a fire had to constantly be kept alight, even in the summer months. Even so, the damp from the sea air meant the odour lingered on, despite the fires. As Roger entered the lodge he had his men-servants begin cleaning up the mess inside. He glanced up at the remains of a mast with a partial sail still attached that poked a wayward hole in the thatched roof, the remnant of a storm that had battered the coast the previous night.

The duke stood outside inspecting the damage.

'I want the roof to be repaired by nightfall.' The men standing outside scattered to get tools, ladders and ropes. He entered the lodge and kicked at the debris littered everywhere about the floor. He glared at the men milling about and watched them as they rushed off to make themselves busy. 'The clean up should have started at first light, Robert.' he growled, kicking some wood.

'It's a bit of a wreck, Sire. If I may say so, the lodge is in need of a total rebuild.'

'Maybe, but it's not the first time I've arrived here to find the place a total shambles. I sort of expect it. It will all be ready for use in two days; mark my words. These men know what they are doing. Meanwhile, we'll have to use the stables. My men make sure they're clean before I arrive in case this sort of thing happens.'

'I sure hope so. I dread to think of the mess we'd otherwise be heading into.'

A mast through a roof was unusual, to say the least, Philippe thought. He stood watching the men as they started to organize themselves into two lines with alternate full and empty baskets passed along the line, a process that was to be repeated hour-after-hour. Philippe noticed the labourers rough attire. He recognized them as slaves, men in bondage; to all intent and purpose dead men. He wondered if these men found themselves and their families in slavery through debt to the duke. Such folk who are unable to support themselves rarely lived very long, they were, he thought, such poor souls. He was used to slavery. He understood slavery was a normal part of life for some men.

He reflected on his home, his daughter, his brother's wife, Maria and his niece. He thought, too, of the money they were earning for their labour and the extortionate cost of delivering this money to their family. At least the duke looks after us in this respect, and the duke organized such things very well, or, he wondered, perhaps this privilege is because of the monk, Cecil. He felt for his purse. It was full; it was always full. Then feeling for his rosary, he prayed to the Lady Mary, thankful he was lucky she was kind to him. He prayed that these people in bondage be treated kindly, but aware this prayer might not be answered, though he was sure these men might have to await death in order to gain their salvation.

Alan looked over to his brother.

'Are we going to get on with this job, Philippe, or are we going to sit on our backsides all day twiddling our thumbs? I might remind you that we're here

to get that mast out of the lodge roof.'

Philippe stared back at the man, who only moments before had been sleeping.

'You've some impudence! I'll toss this coin to see who goes on the roof for the mast. It's a two-headed coin, or is two tailed?.' He winked at him as the coin spun through the air.

'Tails,' called Alan. A moment later he saw that the toss was lost to Philippe. 'Let me take a look at that coin. I'm not so sure you weren't kidding me along. I'm beginning to wonder about you, little brother.'

'You took the call, Alan. I will have control of the oxen. Be careful because that roof looks mighty steep and slippery too.' he said as he strode over to the yoked bovine and prepared to throw Alan the rope. He spied the duke and his guest at the stable doorway watching them, but went about his business as though he had not seen his master. He gazed back up toward Alan and was glad he had brother helping. This could be a tricky manoeuvre, he mused. He would not feel as safe if he were working with a veritable stranger. If this task went awry it would be red faces all round, and a whipping too, especially if the duke witnessed personally such a shambles. He put aside his thoughts and watched as Alan clambered further up the ladder.

Alan threw a grappling hook over the apex, and, using a second ladder, he gingerly hefted himself onto the thatched roof, securing his body with a length of rope in case he lost his footing. On Alan's signal, Philippe threw a rope up to him, who, in turn, threw it over the stout branch of a tree that was well above the height of the hole in the roof.

'That should hold well enough.' He mumbled. He glanced down to see Philippe gazing up at him. In moments he had the rope attached to the mast and called down to Philippe to take the slack and allow him time to crawl clear.

'Are you ready, Philippe? I'm done here. All has been made secure. Be steady, as the wood comes up. I have to manoeuvre the timber around. I don't want it ripping more off the roof than is absolutely necessary. When I shout stop, give me a moment to get clear. Is that understood?' He knew his brother knew the drill, but there was, he thought, nothing like a reminder.

'Al-right, I understand.' he called back, and on Alan's signal, began geeing the ox forward, hauling on the rope and mast.

As the rope became taut, Alan gave direction to Philippe to move or to stop pulling as required. At last, the mast was free and soon on the ground. Alan was pleased he had managed to extricate the offending object with little extra damage caused to the roof in the process. He called for fresh thatch to be brought up to him, and within a few hours the roof was repaired.

The duke and Roger sat down to eat while watching the two men labour the hours away unceasingly. There was something about these two men that was different from the average labourers, something that Roger couldn't quite determine. He called to Georgios, his master-of-sergeants, to bring the brothers to him. Georgios strode over to the Domfront brothers and barked his order.

'Hey, you two! Come here. You're wanted by my master.'

'Who, us?' Alan asked, looking extremely worried that they might have offended someone.

'Come with me. Before you ask, I've no idea what he wants with you, okay?'

'I'm not sure what we're in for, Alan. I can't see we've done anything to upset the duke. Can you think of anything?' Philippe's brow furrowed, his thoughts searching for reasons for their summons. They followed the sergeant to the stables and were told to wait outside. From within came voices. Neither Alan nor Philippe could hear the internal conversation, despite straining their ears.

'I'm unsure what's happening, Alan. If we were about to be punished for some offence, we wouldn't be left standing here outside, alone.' he shrugged sporting a puzzled look.

Moments later three men approached them, and Philippe motioned Alan to attention. Roger looked first at Philippe, and then at Alan, then back at Philippe. He stared deeply into his eyes just long enough to gauge the sincerity contained within them.

'You're a warrior; are you not?'

Philippe looked directly ahead. 'Yes. I've had some training, Sir.'

'I'm told you're brothers. Is this correct?' he asked, searchingly.

'Yes, Sir. My elder brother, Alan, is a trained warrior also.' Philippe lied confidently.

Robert looked impressed and walked around gazing at their neat attire, then threw a punch at Philippe. Instinctively and in a flash Philippe stopped the blow and took Robert to the ground, holding him there.

'I see you've quick reflexes. You've indeed had training.' William commented stepping forward, wearing a puzzled look. 'I've seen you two somewhere before. Would you care to remind me where it was?'

Philippe's boot gently nudged Alan's, indicating he should say nothing, sure his brother was more than happy to leave all the talking to him.

'My brother and I took six horses to England. We accompanied the monk, Cecil. Later we looked after your stables at Quenilly. You might recall we accompanied Engulf to the castle on the day the messenger brought his bad news, Sire.'

William nodded. He recalled the monk, Cecil, telling him about these two exceptional young men who were not only literate, but could speak Latin, Greek, and English, too. Literate men were useful, but worried him and distrusted them.

'They're the Domfront brother's, Sire.' Horace, the monk and duke's scribe, reminded William.

'Ah, yes,' replied William, 'the Domfront brothers, I might have a task for you two. How well can you ride and control a horse?' he asked, turning his head a little to gaze back at the stables

'We ride well, Sire. On our farm we had our own stables.' Philippe half lied, hoping to impress, as well as hoping that the questions would go no deeper.

'I'm looking for good, intelligent officers? Men who can control and command respect from the troops under their direct influence. I recall that it was Master Sergeant Sprig, who first hired you. He told me he'd learned that you are educated. You will be under the command of your new master, Roger Fitzscrob here, who will give you your duties. You can consider yourselves promoted to the rank of Master Sergeant.' William and then turned about and strode out to the lodge.

'I like you, Philip.' Roger said. 'You've a good eye, but I'd have pulled my punch, lest I'd broken my knuckles in your hard chin. The duke likes you too.' he added. As Robert turned to leave the stables, he about-turned and stood looking at them thoughtfully. 'Do a good job, and you'll go far in this company.' he said, then moved off to rejoin the duke at the lodge.

'What the hell was all that about? We only had 'A' horse—and stables? We had 'A' stable Philippe. Anyway, we've been chosen to have responsibility, and I hope that our education isn't going to come back to haunt us.'

'It rather looks that way, Allan. I guess, in part, it's why we obtained employment as quickly as we did, and why we've had rather important jobs around here. The duke has just made us Master Sergeants, and from his own lips too. That'll really increase our income.' he replied sporting a wide grin, then noticed over his brother's shoulder a large procession heading toward the lodge.

Bishop Odo, with a large retinue, appeared, approaching from over the hill, his baggage train, consisting of some twenty mules, was obviously overloaded. Philippe looked on as William strolled across the courtyard to see him focusing his attention on the newly arriving party.

'I've made sure that Odo remains near me at all times Roger. He's not to be trusted, and I'll not leave him on his own in Normandy. For that reason, I've left Roger of Beaumont, and Hugh, the Vicomte of Avranches, to assist Matilda in the Ducal Regency while I'm absent. For now, let's go get some food before we begin the meeting.' The two men made their way inside to a repaired and cleaned lodge. 'Ah, this looks much better, Roger.'

Odo dismounted and made his way to the lodge entrance, with servants running hither and thither carrying the bishop's belongings.

'Ah, Odo, You're moving home again, I see. You're just in time to partake in a meal.' William said, glancing at the boys carrying Odo's belongings.

Odo nodded his acknowledgement to Fitzscrob and looked at his half brother.

'I'm well enough, brother, just tired, and hungry too. It's a long way to travel from Bayeux and my arse is sore for my trouble, I'll tell you.'

The pages brought in a meal of duck, venison, and assorted vegetables, and the men began to eat. Odo sat at the table and began quaffing. If Odo had table manners, he didn't show any and his lack of table etiquette annoyed the duke.

The three men finished their meal and sat about idly chatting, sipping wine and discussing England's division after the conquest was complete.

'I quite like Scrobbsbyrig.' Robert said, smiling. 'I paid a visit there once, with Roger-de-Montgomery. The scenery was beautiful, an hour's riding east and you come to a large gorge that drops steeply to a slow flowing, meandering river, the Severn, I think. It has an odd looking mountain that, from the side, looks like a man lying on his back. I found good salmon fishing, and deer were everywhere. That was a few years back, mind you. I was the guest of Gruffyd, Earl Edwin's father. The town runs along side the boarder of Wales. The Welsh call the town Shrewsbury, and I think that you'd like the place William.'

'You will have the whole province, Robert. Call the place Fitzscrobia.' William said with a chuckle, then glanced at Horace.

Horace was always by his side, quill pen in his hand, ready to receive instructions. Every word was to be written down, copied, witnessed, and stored for future use. It was his job too, to see that the duke's orders were distributed, often verbatim. William often wondered about Horace, who was an extremely obese man with a tonsure shaved too big for his small head. The duke chuckled inwardly, as he gazed at Horace's grossly overweight torso and short stature, recalling how children would often tease and taunt him to distraction. They could be heard calling him *Horace the horse meal monk*, for he could finish off the contents of a platter the size of a horse's nosebag.

Outwardly, William gazed at the man sternly, almost with contempt. Horace would correct the duke's speech, often in mid-sentence. William knew he was right, of course, but he couldn't help despising him for so doing. Despite this annoyance, he was a trustworthy and efficient servant. Had he not been so, he'd have been sent to a monastery a long time ago.

'Have we enough parchment to send messages to all my thegns and officers, Horace?'

'Indeed, yes, my lord, we've more than enough. I'm ready to take down your orders, as long as you don't speak too quickly, Sire.' replied the obese monk, snuffling, suffering from a summer cold.

William was in relatively good humour this evening.

'You know something, Horace. I love a good fight. I would, however, on this occasion, be satisfied with just walking into England and taking the crown that's rightfully mine, oh, and having Harold as my willing vassal. For now, I need you to do some letter work, and my thegns need to have their orders promptly.'

William turned to Robert and took him to one side.

'Scribes are so bloody slow at writing their words. It's so aggravating. They seem to take all sodding day to finish anything. A trained parrot would do the job quicker and speed around to everyone repeating my orders.'

'I know, William, but there's no-one else you can trust to faithfully take your orders. The other scribes are about as honest as Satan. Treat him with more respect; that's my advice.' he said wondering if he might have over stepped.

William resumed his seat, ignoring Robert's remark and began dictating the orders for his men to assemble at Dives-sur-mer, and to bring a specified number of men and supplies. He was thoughtful, and began to speak softly, but with determination in his voice.

'Each thegn must bring his own personal sword and a spear, along with thirty bowmen of good quality, supplied with five hundred arrows each.' Some thegns were ordered to bring much more, including horses, many from the special breeding stables William had maintained about the dukedom.

'I'll see how many ships can be built on site, and if there are enough trees that can be felled from the local reserves, then we'll use them.'

Horace wrote furiously in his own Latin shorthand, trying to keep apace.

'Is that all, Sire?' he asked looking up, wondering if he might have offended his lord.

'Be quiet while I'm thinking! Now, write a letter to Robert-of-Mortain. I

want one hundred and twenty horse-carrying vessels from him. Odo has brought his one hundred boats with him, as I've already requested. That leaves William-of-Evreux. I think he should manage eighty horse-carrying ships. Now, then, Horace, you're to write a letter, instructing Roger-of-Beaumont, Hugh of Avranches, and Robert-of-Eu to each supply sixty ships. Roger is to send supplies as and when I need them. Giffard only has thirty boats, but they carry horses, so that's a bonus. Ah, yes. See to it that they know they are to be ready with their knights, too. There will be similar messages later. Is that understood?'

'Yes, Sire.' he said, flustered with over work, trying to remember it all.

'Right. That should be all for now. You'd better get them copied before nightfall, because I want each one delivered as the copy is finished. I'll take it that's understood too?' Horace nodded meekly and affirmed that he would take care of all that was requested.

'I take it that we've fresh horses ready?' the duke asked with a look that required a positive answer from someone; the only kind he would accept.

'Yes, Sire. We've more than enough, but I'm not sure we have enough messengers to deliver them.' the monk replied, submissively.

'Well then the scribes will have to do the job. Go on-get to it, Horace. If you let me down, there will be trouble. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Sire.' but the monk seemed incapable of moving. He was firmly rooted to his seat with fear, and felt the warm trickle of urine flowing between his legs.

'Are you bloody deaf? Well-go on and then. Get moving! I want your arse out of here. I've not got all sodding day!' he bellowed, irritated.

Horace rose awkwardly from his seat, his body unable to comfortably negotiate the table without him nearly falling to the floor. He managed to right himself, and ungainly, he left the room and made his way to the hall where the other scribes were working feverishly on other tasks. Dropping what they were doing, they scrambled to copy the letters and send them off to those concerned.

'I think that's about all we can do for one day, Robert. You can go and make yourself comfortable in the stable. It's tidy enough, and I'll see you at first light. As for me, well I need to sleep.'

'Then I'll bid you pleasant dreams William. While I'm here, might I ask where Walter Giffard is right now?'

'He's gambling again, Robert. Am I to understand Walter owes you money? Any more gambling and I'll have your arses skewered; now get out and let me rest.'

William awoke refreshed the next morning. He looked out the window, feeling pleased with himself that he'd chosen Dives-sur-mer. It was an ideal embarkation point. The site was sheltered, with many coves and natural breakwaters, containing wharves that he'd had constructed to allow horses to be loaded aboard ships.

Outside, the camp was filling daily with men from all over the dukedom and beyond. They had begun arriving to receive their orders and to train for the battle that lay ahead.

There was a knock at the door and William called whoever it was to enter.

'Soon, I'll have the money, the men and the supplies. All I require now is

the southern breeze and good weather for the crossing.' he mumbled as he glanced over at Roger who had just entered the room. William grinned. It soon turned into a laugh; they both laughed.

Well, thought Gilbert, it's Friday, August 3rd, and the weather was perfect. What more could a traveller want? The breeze is from the west and the day is warm. Gilbert's coxswain had spied Dives-sur-mer and headed toward the wharf. Gilbert was ecstatic for he had a wonderful trip and wonderful news.

A boy ran toward Philippe, calling ships, ships and pointing to the horizon. Philippe knocked on the duke's door and entered, informing the duke ships had been sighted and recognised as being that of Bishop Gilbert, William's envoy.

From the south, along the river, a group of small boats contained Bishop Gilbert of Lieux was now in full view. His arrival back in Normandy from his long trip to Rome, on the duke's behalf, for William was a pleasant sight. Gilbert sat on the bow of the ship smiling at his companions. He turned to gaze on the land.

I'm glad to be back. mused Gilbert. I'm back safely with the required gold and banners. The duke had better be satisfied with my efforts, because he doesn't have a clue about what we had to suffer on our outward journey. This bloody trip was rarely without a mishap or ambush. Try telling the duke pirates roamed the roads and patrolled the waterways searching out victims. He doesn't give a rabbit's arse, as long as he gets his gold and the Pope's blessing-bastard! I've brought him the bloody lot, including the Pope's pledging his full support and banner. If William only knew the promises I had to make to that bloody greedy toad! Neither the duke nor the Pope will keep any of their promises they made. There's no point in showing my disgust in the Pope, nor the duke, if the truth is known. Each man is as bad as the other. Better to keep my musing to himself, thought Gilbert.

Gilbert and his retinue were at last able to disembark their boats. With the Pope's banner held high his retinue mounted ponies brought specially from the stables. They rode into Dives-sur-mer to a tumultuous greeting from the assembled townsfolk and William's forces. As they rode toward the lodge, they were jostled and pushed. Gilbert almost fell off his horse with the milling crowds crushing around him, arms outstretched in order to touch the papal banner he held in his free hand.

As Robert brought William the news of Gilbert's return, the duke immediately mounted a horse and rode out to meet him. As he approached the milling crowd, he could see clearly the Pope's banner. Gilbert noticed the duke approaching and wheeling his horse in the duke's direction.

'Welcome back, Gilbert.' called William, loudly. He is a bloody dunce. He'd better have all I'd sent him for or else I'll kick his arse from here to Caen, William thought. 'Come my dear friend, let's first talk. Then, if your news is good, we can eat.' William said smiling. 'If it's not, the dogs can eat you, eh?' he said grinning as they rode towards the main camp. They dismounted, and together, they entered the lodge.

'Be seated Gilbert. I want the full story of the Pope. I take it that he's backing us?' he asked with a half anxious look, as he put his feet up on the table.

'Oh yes.' Gilbert replied confidently. 'All the way. Though he wants sixty percent of the share for his support.'

'What!?! I thought as much. The greedy little toad.' William replied pulling a face. 'So, have we the money we need to pay the mercenaries?'

'Yes, we have it all, Sire. The gold is being brought up now. It's being placed in the jewellery, ready for your inspection.' Gilbert smiled with relief, and gave William the parchment with the Pope's seal and blessing. William gazed at the huge wax papal seal that was so very intricate. He was impressed and felt smug. England will soon be mine, and I will be the richest man in Europe. He mused, rubbing his hands with utter glee and delight.

'Well done, Gilbert. I'll see that you're well rewarded. If the Pope's gold is all we've asked, it should last us well into England. I'll strip the country to the bare bones. All assets will come back here, to Normandy. England today, and tomorrow, the rest of France!' William once more began rubbing his hands in pure delight.

Gilbert sat back in his chair, thinking. He's mad. He's bloody mad. They are all like sodding wolves. Godless bastards to a man. Still, if it makes me rich, and then I will suck up as much as he likes. I still think he and his friends are lunatics, to take on Earl Harold, he thought, until William's constant and incessant jabbering interrupted Gilbert's thoughts. William removed his feet from the table and leaned forward in his chair.

'I'm going to need controllers for the various Saxon earldoms. The rewards will be substantial. Did you hear that, Gilbert? I said substantial.' William got to his feet and strolled around the room, touching bits of armour and caressing his mail suit. He gazed out the window at the sea. 'I'm coming for my crown, Godwinson, and it won't be long before your head is looking down from my trophy wall.' he said with a smug grin as he turned around to look in Gilbert's direction.

'I couldn't have a better tactician for a lord, Sire.' replied Gilbert, his innate and inordinate sycophancy openly dripping from every pore in his body. Not that William cared. He knew that everyone shared the same avaricious qualities. William spun round and their eyes met. They understood each other well.

'Fitzscrob has been allocated some land. He's going to call it Fitzscropshire, and Odo wishes to have Kent. There will be plenty to go around. You'll not miss out. You've served me well, and your reward is assured. Let's go and eat, then we can inspect our gold.' the duke said, grinning. Gripping Gilbert's arm, pulling the bishop up from his seat the duke led him from the lodge to where an ox was being roasted over an open fire.

'Cut me some meat, boy!' the duke demanded. William picked out a small crusty loaf, broke it in half and gave the other to Gilbert. The boy passed his master some thinly cut meat and offered the duke a goblet of wine. William was looking over the scene of men unpacking mules and tumbrils when he espied Roger

Fitzscrob talking to his half brother, Odo.

'Roger!' he raucously called. 'I need to see all my officers for one last meeting before they embark for Saint-Valery. Go and see to it that they all come immediately. Go on; look lively, man!' Roger waved in acknowledgement, and began calling the messengers to fetch the officers to muster.

William patted the servant-boy upon his head. 'This is good fare, boy. Bring a little more inside on a platter, would you? Oh, and a barrel of ale and some flagons, too.'

'Yes, at once, Sire.' replied the boy, as he ran off to do his master bidding.

William and Gilbert re-entered the lodge and seated themselves as before awaited his men.

As usual, the iron duke chaired the meeting. He was jolly and confident as he surveyed his men.

'Well, gentlemen, it's good to see you've all managed to be here without problems of weather delaying your arrival. Our Lady Mary has been kind to us, and she smiles upon our venture, as demonstrated by the beautiful weather she sends to us. Please, be seated and drink some wine and ale, but not too much, and take your fill from the platter, because we have much to discuss. First of all, I want to fill you all in as to the state of our preparations to-date.' William then called for a messenger boy. 'Have the man called Philippe Domfront come here at once.'

'Yes, sire.' the boy said then ran off to find Philippe.

The room fell into silence. William cleared his throat, sat down and began to speak.

'As you all know, Gilbert has brought the best news. It means our preparations can proceed without hindrance. Now, let us get to work on the details, shall we. We have fourteen thousand men here, and out of these we have eight thousand that will do battle. The rest will have other duties, not least, the feeding and shoeing of the cavalry horses, building a defensive fort and the like.' The duke turned his attention towards Montgomery. 'Has the fort been dismantled, made ready and loaded?'

'It's been ready since Monday, Sire.' Montgomery replied confidently.

'Good. Then all we need is the wind to come around from the south and we can take the high tide out to sea. Are there any questions?' William looked around the table at each man in turn.

Robert-of-Eu, whose duty it was to coordinate the Dives area activities, asked to speak.

'If I might, William. What if the wind doesn't change? We're going to have a rough time keeping the troops from getting too unsettled. You know what these men are like. If the food runs low and the ale and wine run out, we are going to have trouble on our hands. There's been too much preparation for this well coordinated strategy to allow things to be spoiled by the lack of a contingency in coping with disturbances from disgruntled and idle men.' Robert gazed about the room. 'I felt I ought to tell you all just what has gone into this venture.' Robert looked at his master for consent to relay the intricately involved

details. William nodded his approval.

'Go on, Robert. You're not going to shut up until you've told us what a clever shit you are. We've nowhere to go until the wind changes, so go ahead.'

Robert preened then continued.

'Well, I had the scribes set to work on the figures so that we could quantify what was needed and the costs, etc. It comes to a goodly total; I can tell you. We have ten men to a tent, and that comes to one thousand four hundred tents. This meant that thirty-six thousand calves had to be killed to make the hides for the tents. So, that provided for the feeding of the men. We had three thousand horses, all in need of shoeing. That came to twelve thousand new horseshoes! Seventy-five thousand nails in eighteen barrels of iron had to be shipped. I can't find the figures for the blacksmiths that worked on this lot, but they were more numerous than flies around a turd.'

Looks of admiration and some disbelief were on the faces of the men at the table. Robert sneezed, then continued

'We had five thousand cartloads of horse manure to dispose of, and the horse piss alone would fill something like seven hundred and fifty thousand ale barrels. Some of you might have noticed the channel we had dug to drain it all off, so as we would not be inundated with the stuff. The food for the men and hay for the horses are soon to run out. That's going to create a major logistical problem for us. Getting to Saint-Valery is not easy for a fleet such as this, either. It's a full one hundred and sixty miles around our coastline. We may lose some ships, men, and horses. I'm just stating the facts, Sire. A lot of hard work has gone into bringing these things together.'

'Yes, yes. We get the general idea, Robert. You don't have to belabour the point. In any case I need a piss.' William interrupted in a hurry to empty his ladder, he rushed outside.

'Do you think we ought to disperse some of the ships to other ports, William?' Philippe-of-Main asked, as William re entered the room. 'Godwinson may decide on a pre-emptive strike, and attack us in our ports. I feel it would be a good idea to move them.'

'This is under-way, Philippe. Rest assured' William nodded, noting his concern. 'The plan is to disperse Harold's fyrd along the south coast. In any case, they have the harvest to bring in, and his men must return from their duties, or they will lose the harvest. This is the time when we will gain our beachhead. Our opposition will be much less at this time of the year. As for the food supply for the men, I will have more brought in as of tomorrow. Anyone caught ravaging Norman villages for food will be hanged. Is that clear?' William looked around the room. A nodding and mumbling came from the men around the table.

William Fitzosbern's face flushed, turned pale green and his eyes rolled.

'Have you got a problem, Fitz?' asked the duke.

'It's the food I've been eating. I'm not used to it, Sire. Could I be excused from the meeting? I have a real need to lose my insides.' Everyone in the room began chuckling.

'Need to rush, do we?' Odo said, sporting a huge grin. 'He's had the shits

all morning, William. I can't think why, though. He's eaten the same as we have.' The room bellowed into riotous laughter as Fitzosbern rushed outside to empty his bowels. As he made his hurried exit, a messenger entered the lodge and brought news that the wind had veered, coming from the south. The duke's face lit up. He rose to his feet and smartly clapped his hands together.

'Right!' he said, grinning. 'We'll all meet at Saint-Valery tomorrow. Go and gather your men, and God speed our enterprise.' The assembled men rose to their feet. Each, in turn, gripped William's arm before leaving the room to muster his troops.

William could hardly contain his excitement, and spontaneously burst into song.

'Harold, I'm coming to get you. I'm coming to get you. Be prepared to die. I'm coming to get you. I'm coming to get you. I'll punch you right in the eye.'

Philippe Domfront stood in the doorway, waiting to be ushered inside to meet with William.

'Ah, Domfront, I have a task for you.' William passed him the papal parchment. 'I'd like you to read this message for me. Can you do that?' Philippe perused the scroll for a moment, and then read aloud the contents.

'What they told me about you was correct. They say that you and your brother are intelligent, honest too. That's a rare thing. Intelligent men are not to be trusted Domfront. I keep a close eye on such men. I want to know your story and how you came into my service.' The duke sat patiently, listening to every word of Philippe's tale. 'You have every reason to kill me. Why do you not do so?'

Philippe stared into the eyes of a man he knew to be fierce, yet he saw a man with a family, a man who was loved and loving in return—faithful to his wife, yet ruthless when needed.

'My village was destroyed by your men and my family lost everything that we worked for, and for that alone, I should hate you. I see that you despise men of learning, yet you can't do without such men, Sire. As for myself, I bear no grudge. You do what you must to maintain law and order, sometimes at the expense of the innocent. I'm able to understand the way you rule; otherwise there is anarchy and no rule of law.'

'You're a good man, Philippe Domfront. I'll see to it that your family will be supported with a little more. I live amongst men who would have me killed at a glance, given the opportunity. Some of them are closer to me than you could imagine. Strangely enough, such men are useful to me. If you're as honest as men say you are and faithful to me, you'll be handsomely rewarded.' Philippe looked startled. He'd never been spoken to in this manner before, and most certainly not by a man such as the duke, himself.

'I'll do my duty, Sire. My brother, Alan, will do so, too. He's a good man, well worth his salt.'

'Get to your duties, Philippe. And remember what I have said. I'll soon be sitting upon the throne of England. Good men can earn great rewards for loyalty. You may now leave.'

Philippe turned about and left the room. Outside, he gazed about the scene. He felt perplexed. He did not fully understand. I just do my job, he thought.

And then it struck him. The duke was confused, too. The duke had never before encountered true honesty, and the duke, obviously, did not know how to handle such a trait in a man.

A buccina horn called out, and a cry of 'Come to Muster, Come to Muster.' filled the air. The troops milling about readied themselves to embark with the armada sailing to St-Valery. The southerly breeze was strong and fresh. There was a slight swell, but it wasn't too high and didn't appear to frighten the horses as they boarded the vessels. At last, they were on their way to St-Valery. From there, they would sail when ready to England.

Odo was looking across the meadow when he noticed the man he was searching for and he called a boy to bring Eustace to him. Eustace slowly made his way down the gentle slope towards Odo, unaware of what the bishop was going to propose to him.'

'One of these days, he murmured, 'I'm going to give that fat, lazy bastard a piece of my mind. It's as if he thinks that I've nothing better to do, and today of all days.'

Ah, Eustace, can you spare a moment? I really need to speak with you on a matter that is close to my heart.'

'Yes, of course, Odo. What is it that you want of me?' he asked feigning friendship. Odo led Eustace along a pathway toward some undergrowth, out of sight and earshot of any living being. Odo sat on the soft, warm grass, and beckoned Eustace to do likewise. His eyes darted here and there, insuring their solitude. He brought from under his tunic a parchment, which he held tightly, leaned close to Eustace, and began to speak quietly.

'I have a feeling that my half-brother, William, will not survive this coming battle with the Godwinson family. Now, if that happens and we gain a victory, we need to establish a rule over the defeated English. I aim to be that man. I've planned for such an eventuality and wish you to be privy, because you feature heavily in my plans.'

'For God's sake, Odo, who else knows of your plan?' The stunned face of Eustace turned white as the blood drained from his head. Odo's mad, he thought; he is fucking insane.

'For the moment, only you; all I want to know is—are you with me?'

Eustace gazed out to sea, his hands wringing. He was tense with abject fear.

'You've told me nothing yet, Odo. So how can I give you an answer? If I said yes, what would be in it for me?' he asked as he scooted even closer to Odo.

'I would give you Normandy, to do with it as you wish. You'd be my vassal, of course, but to all intents and purposes, you would be as a king, in all but name. I would collect half of all revenues, the rest being yours. We would protect each other, and, eventually I would, with your help, take Rome and the Papal seat. Then, and only then, you would become king of Normandy in your own right. Together, we could and then capture France and build an empire. Now, are you with me?' Odo asked, banking heavily on Eustace's greed and dislike of William, and was fully aware of his dishonourable qualities.

'But only if William is killed. Are you planning to see to it that he doesn't

survive? That obviously means killing him ourselves, doesn't it?' Eustace was beginning to be not quite sure of his abilities.

'If you want to put it that way, then yes.' the fat bishop replied, trying to suppress a smirk.

Eustace gazed deeply into Odo's eyes. Both men knew that if they were to become as Odo wished and Eustace aspired, they had to be sure that the men they had in their charge were willing to follow them.

'You know that I don't have the backing or the men for such a venture.'

'I've loyal men guarding the jewellery. The moment I give the order, we'll use the gold to take the lands we require, to control the territory needed, and to follow through with the rest of my plan. The only pigs in the sty are William's guard. They are loyal and strong. They'll only take orders from us if he's dead. He has to be very dead; do you understand?'

Eustace hesitated. He could see flaws everywhere, but it was too late. Odo had revealed his hand. I could use what he has just told me to my own advantage, Eustace thought.

'Now, look here, Odo—this plan is all in the lap of the gods. You know that. William will not go into the thick of the battle until he's sure there is no danger to himself; he's not dumb.'

'My brother, sorry, half brother, has made many enemies during his ducal incumbency. Some are in the rear guard and would be willing, in the heat of battle, to see to his demise. I don't see too much trouble on that score.'

'William doesn't trust me, Odo. You know that. How could I be of use under such circumstances? It would be impossible for me to actively participate without being detected, surely?'

Odo placed his hand on Eustace's shoulder, and with the other, showed Eustace the parchment with William's seal upon it.

'Are you aware that William is illiterate?'

'Well, no, I didn't. Is William really illiterate?' Eustace looked surprised.

'It's not generally known outside of the most immediate family. Only one other person knows —Walter Giffard. He will have to be eliminated too. He's dangerous and would be against our little venture. He would make sure that Matilda would be queen. No, if my plan is to succeed we can't take any chances.'

Odo shook his head, waving the document in front of him.

'For God's sake, Odo, what's written?'

'William names *me* as his heir. His mark and seal is upon this parchment. It's witnessed by Matilda and the Pope too.' Odo grinned broadly, smugness written across his face and a great sparkle of self-satisfaction emanating from his eyes.

'Matilda and the Pope! How the hell did you manage that?' Eustace looked stunned. Eustace could not believe his ears. Is Odo attempting to implicate me in a plan that might not even work? He wondered. If I inform William, William will execute Odo on the spot. It will mean a great reward for me too, he mused. Odo looking even more confident and smug.

'Ask me no questions, you will be told no lies. Suffice to say, the Pope, fool that he is, is willing to support me, as long as the church in England

comes back to the fold under his full control. Matilda neither reads nor writes, but can make her mark, as can William. It was like taking eggs from hens, really. The ducal archives must have a copy of every deed made, placed there; it's normal procedure. William thought it a copy of a deed gift for Caen Abbey to the Pope.' Odo smiled with pride at his deviousness, and Odo's utter smugness took even Eustace by surprise.

'Bloody hell! You took a chance. William can only die after the victory or close to an absolute rout of Harold's forces, or the men will just fall back and disperse as best they can. Even I can see that, Odo.'

'I have crossbowmen in my personal retinue who are loyal only to me. They will do what is required. In any case, I have their families as hostages, so, if they fail, they will lose all. They'll do as they are told.' he wiped his face of the sweat that began to drip off his brow.

'There is something you have not asked of me. How do you know that you can trust me not to betray you?' he asked beginning to feel even more uncomfortable. Odo stared intensely at Eustace with a stern eye, his mouth tense, and his body taut. A dragonfly buzzed his face. In irritation, his hands swiped at and caught it. It's about time I made my move, Odo thought. He proceeded, slowly, to pull the legs off the unfortunate insect. Tossing the carcass aside, he bent low, their noses now a thumb's thickness apart.

'You've no love for William, nor does he have any for you. If we gain a victory, and when your usefulness is over, you'll be discarded. Only those close to him will gain anything from this. The cost to you will never be recovered. You're not of the inner circle, Eustace.' Odo stood up and turned away to look at the gulls screeching behind him, their fighting annoying his sensibilities. He seated himself upon the grass, facing the birds, and collected his thoughts. Eustace said nothing for a moment, but felt he ought to refute Odo's logic.

'This is true, but you're assuming a great deal.' Odo swivelled his head as quickly as a dog snapping at his prey and abruptly spat out his words, the tension between them making the hairs on his neck stiff.

'Do you think I don't know my own brother? We are nothing to him. If you think that he has feelings for anyone other than those most loyal to him, and then you should think again. I can count on the fingers of my hands the men here who will benefit from this outcome. If I'm lucky, I may just be one of them and only and then because I have the ear of the Pope. Family to William means little or nothing, except for Matilda and Robert. We're just tools to be used and then discarded when finished. Do you understand, Eustace—um?'

'If what you say is true, and I'm sure it is. Then there must be a contingency plan or we'll lose everything.' Eustace moved to sit against a tree, his head in his hands. After some time, he gazed over to Odo. 'No, the risk is too great. If William is to die in battle, I will support you. But I won't risk an attempt at assassination that, if it fails, will destroy us both. The retribution would be my innocent family wiped off the face of the earth. We'd lose everything, and for nothing! I'm prepared to stay close to him during the battle, and if he falls wounded, to finish him off. That's all I am prepared to do.' Eustace wrung his fingers like a distressed maiden, his nails cutting into

the palms of his hands, his head bowed, as the fear of a potentially discovered mutiny gripped him.

'So be it, Eustace. Am I the only one here with any balls to see this plan through? The will, for the time being, shall be postponed. I shall hide it until such time as it can be of use. By the way, there is something I didn't tell you. I have, of course, to protect my back. I felt the need to make another copy of the will in a modified form. You recall you gained your lands from William some years back. I was not a witness to your deed. I made a copy for the ducal records, as is the rule. I made another copy, one that William and Matilda have witnessed. They were none the wiser as to what was written. It's naming you as William's heir. It would be a pity, if under the circumstances, this fell into the hands of either William or Matilda. So, my friend, my insurance of your silence is guaranteed. If questioned, who is going to defend you? No One!'

Odo turned his back for a moment and gazed once more out to sea. He sniffed the air, and ran his fingers through what hair he had left on the side of his head.

Eustace sat motionless and stunned, trying desperately to collect his thoughts. Fuck! He's got me by the bollocks, he thought.

'I understand your motives, Odo. I would have done the same as you, given the reverse situation. I guess that you have my support then. None of this is a forgone conclusion. You speak as if we'll win this battle. Have you forgotten? Harold commands a vast and able force. If we lose, and there's nothing to say we'll win, what then?'

'If we lose and William is killed, we will ask for terms. It's as simple as that.'

'Ask for terms!' Eustace hissed. 'What terms can you ask of a man who has seen his country invaded, his lands and people defiled? You expect too much if you think Harold will see you safely home with a pat on the back; telling you, it's not the done thing, old man. Do you expect that he'll be sending you off home with a note to your mother, saying that you have been a naughty boy, and a warning that you shouldn't do it again? If that's what you think, and then, Odo you live in a world of dreams.' Eustace gave an audible sigh. That confirms it. I now know that Odo is fucking mad, he thought.

'I'll take my chances with Harold. You don't know him. I do. He is a fair man. He knows William and his ways. He understands that we are here unwillingly; he is a pragmatist. His temperament is good and he's always willing to listen to good argument, even when he comes from a position of strength.'

Eustace stood up. Leaning on a low branch, he stared into Odo's grinning face.

'We should allow nature to take its course. Come, Eustace, we'd better become visible once more, or we'll be missed and it will throw suspicion our way. If anyone asks, you've been for a shit, is that clear?'

'I guess so.' he replied as he patted Odo on the back and shook his hand. Why am I doing this? The Lord will have my arse for this decision.

The two men parted and went their separate ways. Odo strolled off to join William, and Eustace to see to his horses.

'I wonder if it is time to speak with Walter Giffard. He may just be wondering what might happen if we lose, too? So many copies of so many deeds.' Odo muttered to himself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The morning light entering from the small leaded windows was a pale blue reflection of the sun's rays off the sea, and scarcely adequate except to dress. William's dressing room was spacious, large enough to hold twenty people comfortably. Around the walls, oak chests and wardrobes full of clothes gave the room a lived-in appearance. The smell of leather and oils filled the rooms. On the walls hung William's armour, which included a set of three hauberks, each hosting riveted links hand-crafted by the finest Norman mail makers. Four conical helmets, each with a nasal bar attached with brass rivets at the front, rested atop their makeshift poles. Straps held the heavy wrought iron protector in place, along with the woven woollen headpiece that kept the head comfortable when wearing the device. William's personal armour makers kept his entire fighting wardrobe, ready for action.

Deep in slumber, the sound of William's snoring echoed throughout the lodge, enhanced by the sparseness of the bedchamber. A spider crawled across his chest, but William noticed nothing. Dreaming of the riches to come. He awoke with a start as the door shook with the noise of Philippe's banging, trying desperately to attract his master's attention. By Philippe's side was a messenger, Gilbert-of-Exmes. Gilbert was a tall, dark haired, sinewy skeleton-like man. He was considered well versed in the ways of his master, making him perfect for the job of messenger.

'Sire, Sire, awake!'

'Jeez, Philippe, do you have to make so much noise? You'll get us both fucking hung!' Gilbert exclaimed, gripping Philippe's muscular arm.

'He'll be dead to the world,' he replied, 'then he snores like that, lightning up his arse wouldn't wake him. I learned that when I first was put to this duty. My brother, Alan, spent an age the other day trying to wake the master from his slumber.' he added with a chuckle.

William rose from his bed, his bright red hair in disarray, his beard, likewise, turned up and bedraggled. He blew his nose, and wiped his eyes of the night's sleep. He was now fully awake. Warily, he reached for a long, sharp dagger. He moved, stealthily, to the door and stood behind it. He slid back the bolt and stood close to the wall.

'Enter!' William bellowed.

Philippe opened the door slowly. Gilbert entered the room looking about for any sign of the duke. Philippe followed, wondering if he had made an error of judgement in waking his master so early.

'Sire?' Philippe called, looking around the apparently empty room. Philippe looked confused as to William's disappearance and scratched the back of his head.

From behind the door, William stood in the silence, acutely aware an assassination attempt could come at any time. Would Harold return the favour I bestowed upon him? William mused. He reached out, grabbing Gilbert by the

sleeve, and pulled him to his side, then slammed the door shut, and on seeing it was Gilbert, the Castellan-of-Exmes, he relaxed. Replacing the dagger in its sheath, he motioned the man to sit.

Philippe looked for the sign that he should leave and a nod from the duke affirmed him all was well, then turned about, and quietly made his exit to resume his position outside his master's bedchamber.

William stood staring at the door. As the door closed, he threw his gaze at Gilbert.

'I want to know what the hell is going on. What is the hour?' he asked, glancing out of the glazed leaded window toward the ship builders on the harbour slips.

'It's a little after the hour of six, Sire.' Gilbert said, gazing at the floor, his hands clenched before him as if in prayer. He lifted his head slowly, biting his lip nervously.

'Well?' he asked, standing impatiently, awaiting the reason for Gilbert's intrusion.

Gilbert recalled the last time he'd felt in complete dread. He well remembered his last beating after giving him the news of the loss of his youngest child. His master's rage had left him with a broken nose and bruises that were visible for weeks.

'Come on, man, I won't bite you. What is it at such an hour?' He motioned to a spot beside him for Gilbert to come closer. 'Come. Stand beside me.'

He composed himself as much as he could and stuttered out the words he knew would blow the duke into a rage.

Outside, Philippe stood silently at ease, bemusement upon his face and feeling awkward. He could hear every word spoken and clenched his teeth.

Sigurdsson has landed in the north of England, near York, Sire. He sends an embassy with a message, and awaits your reply.'

William's temper began to boil. The skin on his face reddened and began to match the colour of his hair. Then, as if the world had been taken over by angels, he calmed, sat down, and spoke in a soft voice. Gilbert stood, motionless, fully expecting behaviour other than this.

'It's not unexpected. Give me a fair wind from the south and we've won. I want you to give a message to Walter Giffard. Tell him that I'm calling a meeting at once and that I want all my generals assembled here immediately. You're to tell each one that I'll rip out the gizzards of anyone arriving late. Got it? This isn't the time to mess about. We've work to do.'

'Yes, at once, my lord.' Gilbert, feeling more relaxed went for the exit.

'Get someone in here to fix the bloody window glaze, while you're at it. Oh, and you did well to tell me. It would have not bowed well for you to misinform, Gilbert. As it happens, the situation favours our landing; be-gone.' He waved Gilbert away, and patted his dog, as a wry smile came upon his face.

'Yes, Sire. I'll have it seen to immediately.' Gilbert's pallor now returned to a normal shade of pink and he relaxed a little more. William turned dismissively to gaze out of the window towards the sea. Gilbert hastened from the room and glanced over at Philippe, who shrugged. Both wondered why their

master had not exploded in his normal manner to such bad news.

William dressed himself, thinking and plotting his next move. I wonder. Am I to fight Sigurdsson and not Godwinson, or perhaps, both? He called out to Philippe to have the servant-boys bring him food.

As William ate, the generals and other magnates made their way one-by-one to the lodge house, where a table and food were made ready. He greeted each man in turn, and motioned him to sit and partake of breakfast.

Horace, the monk, sat motionless; his eyes constantly on his master, waiting for the signal for the proceedings to start. William motioned toward Horace with a nod, giving him permission to call the assembly to order. Horace rose to his feet and took a roll of parchment from his belt.

'On hearing your name, call Aye, Horace demanded smugly. As Horace began calling the names upon the list, William looked carefully at each man.

'Guy-of-Ponthieu, Walter Giffard, Giffard-of-Montford, Eustace-of-Boulogne, Bishop Odo, Robert-of-Jumieges, Allen of Brittany. You're all present. Good, and then we can begin.' William rubbed his hands together gleefully.

Philippe looked concerned, and wondered what was to happen next. Alan shrugged and couldn't quite decipher Philippe's expression. Philippe nodded in the direction of the door and they left the group alone.

'What's going on, Philippe?' He asked innocently. Philippe realized Alan's naivety, being conspicuous by his question, needed an explanation.

'As you know, an envoy from the Norwegian king has arrived. One of the Breton guards told me the Norwegians have conquered England, and Håkon, the Norwegian king's messenger has come to tell the duke that he might as well stay here.' he remarked matter-of-factly. Philippe's worried look never left him as he continued, 'Yet I think they are going to go ahead with the invasion.' he whispered, leaning forward conspiratorially. 'This is serious stuff, Alan. You and I are right in the middle of something neither of us have a hope of comprehending.' Alan held a bemused look that soon turned concern.

'You're telling me that when we go back to England, not only are we going to fight King Harold, but we're also going to fight the Norwegians! We'll be killed too? shit!' Alan spat upon the floor with look of disappointment and sadness. Philippe shook his head.

'I said nothing of the kind. I just meant there was to be trouble, nothing more. Look, we're here to do whatever is asked. If that means fighting the Norwegian king's forces, then that's what we've to do. I've taught you everything I know. Now is the time that you must put that training to good use. We made this decision to come and seek work with the Normans and to look after each other. If we're lucky, we won't have to fight. If not, then we'll just have to make out the best we can.' Alan shrugged and took a swig of ale from a flagon that had been left for him by one of the servant boys.

Back inside the lodge, William's chosen men stood about awaiting their master's orders.

'My dear friends and companions. You know by now Sigurdsson has landed in England. What has occurred, I've not yet been made privy. We've a visitor from

their king, and I think that it's about time we heard the deputation from our esteemed brother, Sigurdsson.' William looked behind him and called out in a loud, raucous tone to Philippe, standing guard outside that he was wanted inside. Philippe entered the room.

'Your bidding Sire?' he asked, standing to attention.

'Philippe, I want you to call the envoy forth.' he requested in an unusually pleasant tone all in the room were unused to. 'Let him eat his fill here, then he might tell us the news he has of his master. He glanced about the room with the smirk of derision upon his face. 'Let's see what they're made of, eh?'

'Yes, Sire.' Philippe replied, and left the room. Stepping outside, he beckoned Alan, motioning his brother to accompany him in the direction of the waiting Norwegian messenger, returning some short while later, with the Norwegian giant, Håkon. Walking between the tall Domfront brothers, Håkon dwarfed them with his immense stature, the brothers brought Håkon forward to meet the man whom Håkon had sought.

Philippe knocked on the door and waited for permission to enter the room. The door opened, and the trio entered. The brothers stood on either side of the Norwegian, but Håkon's huge size and demeanour seemed to posed no threat to those with whom the Norwegian was about to communicate.

Philippe wondered about the giant. This man is powerful, yet has an intelligent persona and presence about him, he thought. He felt a strong empathy with the man, but couldn't understand why he should feel this way. He sensed that Håkon was fearless and energetic, despite the Norwegians enormous size.

'Now, gentlemen, we shall hear what's afoot.' William said, placing his feet arrogantly upon the table and folding his arms. His ginger eyebrows raised and his head tilted a little.

Odo looked a bemused, until he noticed William's wry smile. It was an expression he had not seen often from his half-brother, but knew.

Håkon, Harald Sigurdsson's personal ambassador, approached the table. He was fair-haired, much taller than anyone in the room, very muscular and every bit a warrior. His Norse accent was as broad as the man wielding it, yet Håkon's Norman French was indeed good. He was well versed in the art of diplomacy. At the table he bowed deeply, passed all his weapons to Philippe and waited the summons to come closer. William gazed thoughtfully at Håkon, watching his every move, noticing each twitch and mannerism. Håkon stood quite still, waiting to give his message. His eyes darted about the room, taking in all he could for future reference, should it be required and reciprocated William's gaze.

'Welcome.' exclaimed William. 'Come and join us in our fare. Eat heartily with us and then do please give us the words from your most revered and honoured king.' As they ate William noticed a thick, highly ornate ring on the giant's finger and admired it greatly, then put it out of his mind.

Håkon seated himself at the table opposite William. They looked searchingly at each other, each sizing up a potential opponent. William knew by Håkon's demeanour was a true berserker, a soldier without fear. Håkon was a leader from the front, willing to die for his king without a second thought.

Håkon, on the other hand, knew much more about William than the duke did of his master. He'd been well taught about his character, traits, and mannerisms.

'Your king's message?' William enquired again, waiting patiently. The duke reached for a chicken leg, and slowly began picking off small pieces carefully chewing, noticing Håkon looking on impassively.

The sky darkened a little as a cloud passed in front of the sun, and for a moment, William feared the worst. His almost pagan superstition momentarily unnerved him, but he shook the feeling off. He pondered for a moment. Had Hardrada taken all of England in a fight to the death and won such a glorious victory? He would have known before this, surely, or had the Norwegian king actually lost the battle and has come looking for assistance?

Håkon was silent for a few moments, deep in thought. He knew his man is not trustworthy. I will give him only my news, that told by my king to say, nothing more. I see no companionship, chivalry, or respect within these men here, he thought.

William broke the thoughtful, almost deafening silence and offered him wine.

'Håkon, tell me. What news have you brought of your king, Sigurdsson? I'm eager to know.' The room fell silent again with definite undertones of unease.

Håkon cleared his throat and began his detailed speech.

'My king has taken the north of England and is moving soon to the south, to London. Already he has taken York, and the English fell like leaves falling from the trees. The earl of York, Earl Edwin and his pitiful force met us outside York and have surrendered to us, and Earl Morcar is under siege in the city. It is only a matter of time before my lord holds the whole of England, back once more under rightful Norwegian rule.'

William looked on with a feigned, uninterested demeanour about him. Inside, he cursed. Damn! I thought as much.

'So, why are you telling me all this, Håkon?' he asked, casually.

'My master knows of your plans and he is willing to make concessions with regards for your efforts, Sire. He is a generous man and a realist too. He wishes there to be no conflict or bloodshed between us.'

'Concessions, what concessions?' asked Odo, then averted his eyes after receiving a heated glare from the duke; realizing that he had once more opened his mouth before thinking.

Håkon ignored Odo's question and continued.

'For the sake of peace between us my lord is willing to allow you a territory south of the Thames River. He will assist you in your invasion and the defeat of any opposing Saxon forces. As long as you agree to support us in our move to the south.' Håkon said nonchalantly, almost forgetting his diplomatic manners.

'What of Harold Godwinson? Is he dead?' William removed his feet from the table, replacing them with his elbows and resting his chin in his clasped hands. He found Håkon's information interesting, and pondered whether the Norwegians were having problems. The duke mused for a moment. It changes nothing. Either way, we win. Two depleted armies against a fresh force.

'Godwinson hasn't been seen.' replied Håkon. 'No one has heard of any plans or seen troop movements of any kind. It's as if the Saxon king does not exist.'

We know that the Saxon navy was disbanded and sent home. The fields are being harvested and life seems to go on as normal. It's most perplexing.' Håkon shrugged, but his bemused state of confusion was missed, even by the duke, and he was grateful. He couldn't understand the rationale any more than anyone else.

'What of Harold's brother, Tostig? Am I to understand the slimy toad is assisting your master?' He gazed around the room, his sarcastic remark inviting the smirks from the faces of those around him.

'Tostig is in York with my king. He's been a valuable asset to our invasion.' Håkon replied, with informed knowledge and outward confidence.

William needed to take stock. Even if he wanted to, he knew he couldn't sail. The wind had been from the north from the day they arrived, with no sign of a let up in its direction. I guess that I will just have to wait it out, he thought. He knew that he had to keep up the payments for his mercenary troops, or they would wander off and seek employment elsewhere, he pondered, then he returned his attention back to Håkon.

'I will give you our answer in the morning Håkon. First of all, I need to consult with my learned advisers.' He spread his hands in gesture toward Håkon, 'Feel free to amuse yourself. We will be happy to quarter you in comfortable surroundings.'

Håkon nodded that this was agreeable, stood up and bowed low once more, knowing even as he did so that it was only a political obeisance. He's going to fight us, he mused. I will enjoy thrashing this avaricious bastard. He smiled the smile that only a diplomat could give, then turned to make his way to exit through the door.

Philippe and Alan once more acted as escort to Håkon. However, before they could leave the building to lodge Håkon, they were stopped by Walter Giffard's order to remain right outside the door until it was determined where, exactly, Håkon would be housed for the night.

Philippe had taken a liking to Håkon. He felt that they had much in common. Håkon possessed a quality he didn't often see in men of such stature. He sensed, too, He was a thinking man. Håkon had a kindly face, distinguished easily through his tough exterior, if one looked closely enough. Upon Håkon's arrival in Normandy, a guide had informed him that Håkon had heroically saved the life of a young boy, by pulling the lad from under the hooves of a runaway horse. Philippe gazed into the face of the giant.

'I'm not sure if they want to change the lodgings for you, Håkon. Either way, we'll wait awhile, until they make up their minds. Their deliberations always seem to take forever.' he said slowly shaking his head. He motioned they should sit awhile on the steps of the lodge and wait. Meanwhile they chatted, getting the feel of each other.

Inside the lodge, the men around the table were silent for a moment while all eyes were on the duke. William turned his attention to Fitzscrob.

'Roger, what did you make of what you heard?' he asked thoughtfully. 'You can say what you feel.' William advised.

'My lord, we needn't make a fight of it, surely. We can just walk in and take what we want.' replied Fitzscrob with an indignant tone. Odo looked at William's

face and at once knew the man had said the wrong thing. Odo kicked Roger under the table, giving his comrade a serious look, indicating that to say more was to court trouble. William eyes narrowed as he turned to Walter Giffard.

'Walter, what have you to offer?'

Giffard looked thoughtful. He was a man with an immense, powerful frame, and like William, huge of stature. His hair was as dark as the night sky, with a beard to match. He took a long, thoughtful gaze at William, then, holding a cross in one hand, he mumbled a quick prayer for what he was about to do.

'My lord. We carry through with our plans as before; only this time we may have a different enemy. Let them deplete themselves, for we can make easy meat of them. And? err-do you wish me to take care of Håkon?' William grinned and nodded approvingly.

'Is there another option?' he mused allowed. 'Take with you whom you trust most to do the job, Giffard. There can be no errors of judgement. Ah? Give the two French brothers, Philippe and the other one, the task. It's about time we saw how they handle this particular type of work.' Giffard nodded.

'Right then,' said William slapping both hands down on the table, 'that's settled. We'll sail the moment the winds veer to our favour.' William turned his attention to Eustace. 'Are your men ready, Eustace?'

'Our horses have food for another two weeks, and I don't foresee any problems just now.'

William gazed about his council.

'I want your men well fed. This is a crucial moment for us. Desertions could cost us the battles to come. We need first to take the treasury at Winchester, then we will march onto London. This way, we can control how any further battles progress. We can and then afford to hire as many mercenaries as there are in Europe. Are there any questions?' William looked about for any input, but there was none forthcoming.

'So business is concluded.' William said, satisfied with the completion of yet another valuable meeting. The men left the table, and one-by-one, made their way back to their duties.

William found himself with more plans to make; now that he knew what was afoot with Harald Sigurdsson. Time will now be of the essence, he thought.

Giffard made his exit from the lodge, determined to insure that Philippe and Alan, understood their real duties. He noticed them sitting upon the steps chatting with Håkon. Giffard beckoned Philippe to him. Philippe stood up and to a respectful attention.

'Philippe.' Giffard said, taking Philippe to one side he spoke quietly into Philippe's ear, 'The duke wishes that this should be Håkon's last day on earth. Are you up to the job?' Giffard looked impressed with Philippe's posture. Philippe nodded, and smiled.

'Whatever the duke wishes, it will be done, sir. Do you wish that we kill Håkon here or somewhere else?' Bastards, Philippe said inwardly, continuing his thought train. I wondered why they were taking their time. Well, fuck you too, Giffard! I would rather slit your throat first. He controlled and hid his anger well, keeping a perfectly expressionless face.

'No,' replied Giffard, 'take him to Port-et-Bourg. Deal with him there, and report back when you've completed the task. There's a rather nice well there that we could lose him in. We don't want anyone visiting us and finding the remnants of a lost friend now, do we? Off you go, and then.' Giffard's wrist flicked as a master's would to a child to be off.

'Yes, sir. The job is as good as done. You'll not have any problem. I'll complete the work efficiently, and without mishap.' You bastards, he thought.

Giffard spun round and strolled off to meet with his peers for a final check of his personal arrangements with regard to his horses and armour.

Philippe strode briskly back to his companions, the anger upon his face now too evident.

'What's the matter, Philippe? You look really annoyed. I've not seen you like this since the incident at the inn. What did Walter Giffard say to you to make you so angry?' Alan asked sporting a puzzled look.

Philippe stared directly at Håkon.

'They've given me orders. I'm to take you to Port-et-Bourg, and then I'm to kill you; that's all- bastards!' he seethed.

Alan's mouth dropped open in disbelief. Håkon looked bemused, then laughed, waving his arm dismissively at such a notion.

Philippe moved forward, hoping that Håkon would understand his next action.

'Håkon, I'm going to place you in fetters in case we're spied upon. Alan will bring a horse and tumbril over here. You'll need get aboard it and feign captivity. When I'm sure we're safe enough, I'll release you, then you can ride off to find a haven somewhere. Is that understood?'

It was now the turn of Håkon to drop his jaw, but he nodded his compliance.

'You mean you're going to disobey a direct order?' Håkon stared hard at him, wondering why Philippe was willing to jeopardize his future for the sake of him.

'Yes, of course. I'm no murderer. In any case, the duke had our village fired, and we lost everything we owned and everything that we had worked hard for. So many innocent people were murdered that day. I'm not going to see yet another innocent man slain for the want of one man's whim.' he replied, as he stared blindly at the ground, taking in a deep breath. 'Håkon, the Bible says the words *Thou Shall Not Kill*, at least not in cold blood. Is that not good enough reason? He gazed back up into the giant's face. 'Anyway, you're a brave man to walk alone into the lion's den. In my eyes, you've done no wrong. I like you, and admire you too. Does that answer your question?'

'I guess that's as good an answer as any.' Håkon replied with a trusting smile.

'As for now, you follow my directions to the letter, then all will be well. Håkon, I'm putting our lives on the line here, and those of our families too. God in Heaven will see that we're safe, but we must not allow Satan to know what it is that Alan and I are about to do. So I'm asking you to think pure thoughts. is that understood?'

'I'll do as you ask Philippe,' Håkon replied, 'but I'd rather knock you both unconscious, and escape. That's much safer for you. On second thought though, you might find yourself hanged for failing in your mission.'

Alan ambled over to the stables, and soon returned with a horse and fetters.

'This crossbow is about to be pointed in your direction. Alan and I will motion you against that tree over there and will pretend to knock you over the head. You're to fall to the ground and we'll..' Håkon interrupted him.

'I get the general idea Philippe. 'Just don't make the process too real. I wouldn't appreciate having a sore head. By the way, how are you going to account for the loss of the horse?'

'As for the horse, um? Well, we'll deal with that problem when the time comes.' he replied. Giving a deep sigh, Philippe nodded toward Håkon's hand. 'I'm going to need that ring, though. It'll prove that we've done their dirty work.'

'That will do nicely Philippe, but I have also an addition to your safety.'

'Oh, what's that?'

'I noticed, this morning, a little way out of town, a man hanged from a tree. He was a large man of about my size. We should cut off his hand, and place my ring upon one of the digits. That way you gain credibility, and I get to keep my finger.' Håkon said grinning.

Three hours later, Alan and Philippe made their way back to the duke's lodge.

'I was surprised Håkon refused to take the horse, Philippe.'

'I wasn't, Alan. He's a warrior, and what's more, he is a gentleman, too. I suggest that you return the animal to the stables, while I go and inform Giffard we've performed the task required of us. I'll give the duke the ring and finger, and that should be the end of the story. By the way, does the Bible say anything about telling lies?'

It was late morning when William woke from a good night's slumber. He rose from his bed and looked out to the sea. He noticed the windsock he'd mounted outside, showed a good strong breeze from the south, and the sight brought a broad smile to his face. He felt for and twisted the large new gold ring. I think I could get to like the Domfronts, he thought. He looked up again and the windsock was still blowing strong from the very best direction.

'At last, I'm coming for you, Godwinson.' he mumbled. He washed his face and finished dressing. He strode briskly out through the door calling for a messenger. 'Herald! Call a muster of the following generals: Geoffrey of Mortagne, Roger Beaumont, Bishop Odo, William Fitzosbern, Eustace-of-Boulogne, Aimeri-of-Thours, Giffard-de-Montford, Robert of Mortagne, Giffard-of-Ponthieu, Ralf-de-Tosny, and Walter Giffard. You're to tell them to come here and remain close by my side at all times. Do you understand?'

'Aye Sire, at all times. the messenger replied.

'Good. Be off and see to your duty. Oh, and while you're about it, I want you to bring the monk, Giffard Margot, back here with you.' The herald left the lodge, sending messengers to find each of the named thegns.

Within half an hour, all the generals were once more in William's anti-chamber. They stood about, not knowing what was coming next. Many of them jumped, startled, when a few moments later when William walked in from the

bedchamber slamming the doors open as he strode into the room in obvious good humour. They sat down quickly in their chairs as the duke's voice beckoned them to be seated.

'Well, gentlemen, we leave on the next high tide. Does anyone have a problem with this?' He gazed about the room and saw that no one had any doubts as to their abilities or with the project. 'Right then! Get the horses loaded, your men ready and fed. Oh, yes, ale and wine are forbidden. Is that order fully understood by you all?' The duke looked sternly about the room. At this point, William was in no mood for things to go awry. 'I shall have a beacon lit on my ship, the Maria. You will follow my lead and we will all be in fine shape. Sails and oars will be used together. The quicker we get to England the better. Go and attend to your duties.' William turned about, and as he was about to return to his bedchamber when he halted. He turned back to face the assembled men. 'Oh, yes, good luck, and Godspeed. I'll see you all in England.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The darkness hides a thousand misfortunes. For some, the sea was cruel; yet for others it was kind, as the armada set sail into the unknown. The warm southerly breeze brought the scent from the land that caught William's nostrils, and it reminded him of the one and only visit he made to visit Edward in England; all those years before. He didn't like the crossing and then, and this morning was to be no exception.

The water was choppy, and the spray crashing off the bows of boats washed the faces of the warriors as they set off in the darkness, with the day not long behind. Each ship was aglow with torches, their glimmering movement, like giant fireflies bobbing up and down in the water, could be seen all along Normandy's coast.

William's flagship, the Maria, had a tall mast. At the top were two small braziers, which burned brightly. William had ordered them mounted and, lit so that the armada could follow his ship and land at the same destination.

The captain said that the sea was so unusually calm that William might have ordered God to make it so, just for him alone; but one man's calm is another man's raging sea.

William looked through the glare of the brazier at the ship's crew and ordered them all to kneel for prayer. Only the sounds of snorting, nervous horses and the lapping of water were evident, as the men on board listened to William's prayer for their safe deliverance upon unwelcome shores.

'Gracious Lord, we ask for your divine help in our venture. Protect our fleet from harm. Bring us safely to the shores of England and keep us safe in our just course. Amen.' William's thoughts were ending this perilous journey. 'Right, you lazy turds, row, or I'll have every man whipped.' I'll kick some idle arses if those bloody oars aren't pulled any harder, he thought. William hated water; it frightened him to his very core. To show his fear, however, would undermine the enthusiasm his men, but nonetheless, he held on to the mast as if he were on the edge of a precipice.

The duke gazed into the face of his personal stallion and stroked his soft

nose. Such a fine example of equine form, he thought. The horse was fearless except for fire, which was the only thing that would make the horse shy. William thought back to how he'd joined the stable boys to groom this fine animal, but he'd regretted giving Toli to Earl Harold, and not keeping her for himself, and wondered how long it would be before he'd have that fine horse back.

The men rowed for what seemed an eternity, until the breeze became still fresher, filling the sail fully, just enough to speed their crossing, without the Maria rocking in the swell too much, and the men finally able to up the oars. Even so, the sea was relatively calm, and stars just visible against the glare of the brazier above them.

William gazed constantly ahead, looking for any sign of England's coastline, a land he'd once visited to gain the promise of the crown from King Edward. He wondered if it were true that Edward had reneged on that promise, but his thoughts were interrupted when he suddenly heard a call from the ship's master, near the stern.

'We've lost the ships, Sire. There's no sign of them! If we drop the sail, they should catch up to us, but we'll drift a little, as the current is strong at this point.' the master said, then called for the sail to be lowered and looked to the east for any sign of dawn, because he feared that the following armada would not see their light.

'Damn! That's all we need!' William growled.

'The other ships are heavily laden, Sire. The boats smaller than ours, carrying horses will be much slower than this vessel- it's only to be expected. As I've explained, Sire, they're fighting a strong tidal race. They might have drifted to the west of our planned route. If we wait here, their masters should see our beacon, and follow it. I doubt they'll have been able to keep their torches alight for long, so it's no wonder we can't see where they are.'

The master dropped a weighted line to sound the depth and called out.

'Seven knots.' he yelled and looked at William. 'It won't be long before we see the shore. The sea is quite shallow here.' William felt enough confidence in the ship's master to let him judge what should be done.

'You're the master of this ship. I'll take your good advice. Give the orders as you will.'

Walter Giffard sat gazing into the blackness, wondering what lay ahead when they landed. Will we be confronted with a mighty force that would drive us back into the sea? What if Harold's navy attacked us? Would we be ignominiously defeated, leaving the survivors to slink home in disarray and disgrace? We're sitting ducks, ripe for plucking. He looked up to see a boy shining up the mast, to place more wood on the brazier above them, a signal to the world of their location. If the other ships could see the beacon, and then so could the Saxons. It was a thought that he didn't relish. Giffard pondered, What if they'd lose the element of surprise? and then comforted himself with the thought that the Saxons would be fast asleep, oblivious to their coming. He was jolted from his thoughts by the loud calling of the ship's master.

'Heave, ho!' called the master. 'Lift up your oars, and bring down the sail.' The sail came down with a thud, just missing the head of one of the knights.

'How far are we from the Saxons coast, master?' William called to him.

'About an hour away I would say, no more, though we may have drifted a little from where we had planned to land, Sire. For every hour we wait here, we will drift eight more miles.'

'Can we make it up?' William asked, who was not used to the ways of the sea.

'Yes, Sire, but the tide is changing.' the master replied, when was suddenly interrupted.

'Ships Ahoy!' the lookout the cried, pointing. 'Over to our stern.'

'We'll give them time to catch up; and then we will move on. Stragglers will just have to make their own way. Does that sound reasonable to you?' William asked.

'I think that will be sufficient, Sire, but the drift will take us more toward Pevensey than Hastings. If you're keen to land and disembark, we can spend that extra hour moving westward, but it will be full light by that time.'

'What's Pevensey like, and can we land there?' William was hoping that he could be off the ship and on dry land before he threw up.

'Yes, Sire. We can land at Pevensey, but it's shallow and muddy. It is not a landing I would advise with fully loaded ships, especially ships carrying horses. Mind you there are lots of sheltered inlets there we could use.'

'And how far is Hastings from Pevensey?' he asked looking disappointed.

'About a hour's sailing, from here, but nearer two hours if you disembarked here, and you decided to ride round the coastline from Pevensey to Hastings, Sire.' replied the ship's master apologetically.

'Then you will disembark my horses and knights there. You'll and then sail on and meet me at Hastings. Is that clear?' William smiled with relief that he would soon be on dry land.

'Yes, Sire. I can do that. You should find an old chalk pathway. It's clearly marked. It'll take you to Senlac Hill. Once there, you'll see a clearly defined road down to Hastings, which is a small fishing village.' The master noticed William smiling at him, and returned the smile.

'Clearly I chose the right man for this job.' He picked an apple from a bag and ate it with relish, his tummy feeling much better.

'It's all part of the service, Sire, all part of the service.' replied the ship's master, grinning. 'We're very lucky. The crossing can be very rough, sometimes.'

'Master, when we have taken England, come to me. I'll reward you with land. Your work has not gone unnoticed.'

'I thank you, Sire, but now you must prepare to land. It won't be easy to disembark. Be warned. The tide will not favour our position if we don't move in right away.'

The morning light, a pale blue-black, fighting to push the darkness aside, slowly began to win the battle for supremacy over its opponent. The coast of England could be seen clearly against the lightening sky, a deep green intermingled with the browns and yellows of freshly harvested fields.

William's stomach knotted, he knew that he could either live or die in the next hour. What fate awaited him, he couldn't be sure. For a moment he wondered

if he'd brought the troops on a fool's errand, and if Harold's army would wipe them out on the beach. A seagull swooped, then landed on the prow of the Maria. It stood looking at William for a few moments, then it turned, and facing the direction of travel, lay down upon its breast.

'A good sign, Sire, a very good sign, and look, there is another on our stern.' the master said gleefully. 'The angels are riding with us within the birds. God is surely on our side.'

William shivered. He'd not slept, and his stomach was threatening to eject what the apple he'd eaten. The sea's swell began to rise as they approached Pevensey Beach, and he could see nothing but mud flats that didn't give him much hope of a dry landfall.

'I'll place you down on good ground, Sire. A little way to the east we'll find the ideal spot to disembark you. Look, there's the old path. You can see it in the chalk above.' said the master, pointing to the white chalk. 'It's the only high ground until you reach Hastings.'

'Well, make it a good beaching. I really could do with a shit.' William said, grimacing. 'I'm not shoving my arse over the side for anyone.'

'Hold on; we're approaching the shore, and we'll need all hands. The race is now strong here, so have the men keep the horses steady.'

The Maria lurched as it hit the bottom of the shallow beach. They were five leagues from the shore when William decided to jump for it. As he did so, a swell lifted the ship, and the vessel again lurched forward. William fell head first into the water. The men aboard the ship looked at each other, taking their master's fall as an omen of ill fortune. Many began to be afraid that their venture would fail.

'God is giving us a sign to turn back.' mumbled one man. The murmuring, amongst the superstitious men aboard, ceased as the duke rose from the water. The knights and men cheered as they saw their leader wasn't injured, the relief clearly imprinted upon their faces.

Wearing a huge grin, and in water up to his waist, William barked out an order,

'Well! What are you waiting for? Get the hell off the ship, and get unloaded. Master, you did a good job. We will see you in Hastings, and be ready to move quickly if we get into real trouble. Is that understood?' William moved further onto the beach. Bedraggled and cold, he began to remove his attire, beckoning to a boy to bring him dry clothes. Clearly, he was happy to be on dry ground again.

'Yes, Sire, you can rely on me.' the boy replied.

The knights and their pages disembarked rapidly and precariously, the onshore waves making the boats rock back and forth, sometimes pitching forward and frightening the horses. One horse drowned, almost taking a page under the water with it. Another horse fell into the water with an agonized cry, breaking its leg. Walter Giffard followed the thrashing horse to where it fell. He took a sharp knife and slit the animal's throat. The horse lay still with blood forcefully pumping from its jugular.

'Horses spill a lot of blood.' Giffard said to his page, though Giffard was looking for the entire world like the soggiest creature alive. 'I hate to have to kill a good steed like that, but there's no other way when a horse breaks a

leg, my lad.' Giffard saw that the boy was covered in blood and looked very sticky. So too was Giffard, and he was glad to be out of the ship and onto dry land.

The youth clambered back onto the vessel and took a leather bag from the beached ship, withdrawing fresh, dry clothes for his master and making his way up the beach to where Giffard was waiting. Further up the muddy beach, William could see that Pevensey was flat and bleak.

'The land won't give any shelter from the wind. We'll have to move quickly, or we'll be in trouble, Walter.' he said, calling through the wind, as he gazed about, taking in the progress of the unloading of the men, horses, and equipment.

'I see we've lost two horses, already. That's not a good start.' he growled, noticing the ground was sodden and muddy. He watched as otters scampered about here and there catching fish, darting in and out of the water, leaving their footprints in the mud. The spiky marran grass grew tall, too tall for anything but birds flying overhead to see. He didn't like the lay of the land, and beckoned Giffard to move closer to him.

'The terrain is flat, and it goes on forever. I don't like it, Walter. We should move out as soon as we're unloaded and dry. We've no time to rest or eat, but we can do that later.'

'As you wish.' replied Giffard, standing wet and bedraggled. William sat on a clump of marran grass and pulled off his footwear and began pulling on dry boots his page had provided. He noticed the old chalk path was a long way off. It seemed so close, from the ship, but they eventually found the path up the gentle slope. It meandered slowly up to higher ground where the duke finally ordered them to rest a while and eat.

A while later William rode ahead with Walter Giffard and found a point where they could watch the Armada slowly moving on behind the Maria. The ships were heavily laden and so deep in the water that some seemed as if they would capsize at any moment. They ploughed steadily onward, heading toward Hastings, their final destination.

'I don't see a soul about, William. This place is just fenland.'

'I agree Walter, this is very eerie. There's not a soul about, not a living being. Where on God's good earth are Harold's forces? We did tell them that we were coming to beat the shit out of them, didn't we?'

'Perhaps they just gave up and are waiting for us to march into London and take over the reins of government.' Giffard replied, sporting a wide grin. 'In any event, Håkon did say that Sigurdsson had taken England, well at least in the north, hmm? You'd have thought that he would have at least placed a guard around the coast.' He gazed about the sparse landscape. 'I know you'd set your heart on kicking Harold's arse, William. So what could be going on?'

William, at the mention of the Norse berserker, looked at and twisted the heavy gold ring, given to him by Philippe, after he had killed the man. He changed gear and pondered their position.

'Now that would have taken all the fun out of coming Walter, but I'm still uncertain as to Sigurdsson's role in all of this. He might have defeated Harold,

and perhaps come as far as London, but to leave the south undefended? Especially since he knew we were preparing to come here. You can see the fields have all been harvested, so men should now be free to fight with Harold's fyrd.' He pointed out to sea, 'Look seaward, Walter, we have the only ships on the sea. This is most unnerving.'

William dismounted and took out some food from his saddlebag. They both sat eating game and bread. The duke was constantly moving, his eyes darting, now and then, looking for any signs of his or Harold's scouts. He took an apple and began to chew.

'I don't like this one bit, Walter. Something is awry here, and I wish I knew what it was.'

Giffard sat gazing in the direction of the sea, wondering if this might be his last day on this earth, then gazed toward his master. The Saxons outnumber us twenty-to-one, he thought, as a shiver went down his spine. Not good odds, not good at all.

They settled themselves back once more into the saddle and made their way farther along, but the track was not an easy one. It left the fenland behind and rose up through the steep hills of the South Downs, with thick brambles on either side, that, but for their mail armour, would have cut into their legs. As they topped a steep bank William spotted a flat, wide path that led to a long-since abandoned Roman castle in the distance. He could see the sea framing the beach at Hastings at the base of a long run down this thousand-year-old Roman built road.

The offshore breeze became a wind, and the men felt chilly as the Saxons Channel cooled the air from the south. Their destination was a joyous sight to all the riders who had finally caught up with William and Giffard. In the distance of about an hour's ride away, the men could see the ships docking, with the rest of their comrades and supplies being unloaded.

'Behold, who cometh!?' The shrill voice of a woman came from the bushes just ahead of them. Slowly, two women scrambled from a brush dwelling that looked like a hastily fabricated shelter, and made themselves visible to the riders.

Giffard could clearly see the two women. Oh God, no, that's all we need, a couple of mad witches, he thought. He dismounted and walked toward the women. As they emerged fully from the bushes, Giffard noticed that the women were looking as though they'd been cast out from the community for filth and ugliness. Both women were dressed in woollen rags, their faces covered in pustules. As he drew closer he saw their rotten teeth and smelled the women's vile breath. The hags sported bright red hair that was unkempt, greasy and amass with fleas. The awful stench emanating from these unwashed women drifted into the nostrils of anyone within twenty paces. Giffard retched at the offensive odour and took a pace back, turning his head into the wind, attempting to breathe in some fresh air. Giffard spoke in Saxon with a Kentish dialect to communicate with the women.

'Who are you, you wretched hags?' he asked, skewing his head away from their stench.

'I am known as the Widow Kempher, Sire. They say that I am a witch about these parts.' Yellow mucous ran from the woman's nose. She wiped the offensive

mass on the sleeve of her rags and sucked the rest of it down her throat, then spat out the vile detritus onto the ground. The witch Kempfer, looked at her companion, giggling as they both took a few paces forward, almost mockingly, waving their arms. Giffard felt for and withdrew his sword, looking menacingly at the woman.

'If you value your life witch then stay where you are. You will now answer my questions.'" Giffard stared at the second woman, in the vain hope of gaining a sensible answer. 'Who are you, and what do you know of Harold?'

'I am called Cainasagtit, on account of my long, knobbly legs and droopy breasts, Sire. We know your business here.' she snarled. The women began to giggle in a slightly maniacal manner at Giffard's comical Saxon accent. They nudged each other and began laughing, almost insanelly. William bent forward, a linen cloth held over his nose.

'Giffard, what do these women know of Harold?' he asked, looking irritated. Giffard turned once more to the hooked-nosed witches, repeating their answer to William.

'What information of Harold have you, woman?' He could see both the women were clearly mad and despaired of gaining any information from them.

'These woman will be of no use to us, William. It's clear to me that they are outcasts from their community.'

The Widow Kempfer pointed her gnarled fingers menacingly at William.

'You are William. You will be king, but you'll die a horrible death soon enough for your troubles, Sire. You will burn, and be in a thousand agonies!'

Once more, the witches began to giggle. The witch, Cain, whose dribbling gave her clothing a soaked, slimy appearance, stepped forward and gestured at William with her withered fist. William rode towards the women, withdrew his razor-sharp sword from its scabbard, and with one mighty swipe, cut off the head of the witch, Cain. Then turning his steed a little to angle his aim, he repeated the procedure on the Widow Kempfer, and their heads rolled down the steep embankment until they fell over the cliff never to be seen again.

'Throw the hag's bodies after their heads, Giffard. Let's see them sew them back on!'

The duke rode on a little ways, leaving Giffard and his servant, along with two others to dispose of the hag's bodies. Soon the group caught up with the duke. William halted the entourage on a small hillock that gave a commanding view of the surrounding countryside and waited while he too stock. From this vantage point, William could see the sheep on the South Downs, and children looking after them in the distance.

The sun was warming the air. Bumblebees and the last of the summer's butterflies, fluttering here and there, were oblivious to William's presence. He dismounted and sat on the grass, looking out to sea. He could see the many ships bobbing up and down, waiting their chance to dock at Hastings. A smile came to his lips.

'This is a good spot to rest, I'd say. He turned to his obese half-brother. We'll set our camp here, Odo. From here we can get the lay of the land.'

An hour later he remounted his steed and motioning Giffard to do likewise, they

moved off.

'I'll be back with a working party, Odo. Walter, you follow me.'

Odo sat looking across to the cliffs. He was pensive, chewing at his bottom lip. The feeling of loneliness in this strange land began to play on his nerves. William had given him no instructions as to what to do if they were driven back by Harold's forces. Taking out three gold coins from his purse, he turned to his page, Robert.

'If I give instructions for you to canter away, this will mean that you should procure a ship for our escape. It should be made ready to sail at a moment's notice, boy. You will choose a ship with my pennant aboard. Pay the master two gold coins and keep the other coin for yourself. The ship should be taken to a secluded spot, and its position made known to me upon your return. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Sire. I understand.'

'Good. Now we shall proceed to make camp.'

William and Giffard rode slowly down the steep hillside toward the cobbled fishing port of Hastings. All of a sudden a shout from the bushes took them by surprise.

'Halt! Identify yourselves!' came the call from a hidden Breton voice.

Twenty men and then showed themselves from the thickets to surround the two riders.

'Who is your sergeant?' Giffard called, noticing the man's armband.

'I am the sergeant of this company. I'm William-de-Warren. Identify yourselves or die!' the sergeant indignantly called to the mounted men.

de-Warren stood in the centre of the men at arms, and was obviously quite prepared to kill the next man who moved. Four men held the horses of William and Walter, while other men stood with bows fully drawn and aimed at the two riders.

'If you won't identify yourselves, I will assume you to be the enemy. You look wealthy and perhaps worth taking in for a ransom.' said the sergeant craftily.

'I am your lord, Duke William of Normandy, and this is Walter Giffard. William-de-Warren, you have done well, and you shall be rewarded for your vigilance. I shall remember you. What news is there of our enemies, the Saxons?' The sergeant bowed low before speaking slowly.

'Sire, there is no sight of the Saxon forces anywhere. The village on the shoreline is almost deserted. The only people left there are a few old men and women with children. They replied, when questioned, that the men left with Harold, and haven't been seen or heard from since the crops were harvested.' the sergeant said with a shrug, looking as mystified as William.

'Keep on full alert, sergeant. We could be ambushed at any time. Now, we will pass.' William and Giffard moved on as the men backed aside to watch the two men ride into the distance.

'Hastings is a small fishing village with a population of no more than a few dozen souls left behind. This village isn't inbred, as some villages are, William. They have constant cross-channel contact, and Anglo-French marriages often take place. Many of the men who come to Hastings are welcomed as family

members, billeting as many as ten in their small homes.' said Giffard as they made a plodding pace down the hill.

'In that case Walter, we'll treat the people here as Normans. They'll not be put to work.'

As more ships came ashore the men disembarked, and their cargo removed and stored. The ships then anchored offshore with long ropes, often tethering as many as twenty ships together. From the sea the land rose gently, with meadows that held a few crofters cattle here and there. Sheep roamed on the higher ground beyond, where still further, the forest began in earnest.

The sergeants began grouping their men together into battalions. Cooks and blacksmiths were billeted together so that wood could be collected and used in one place. The hustle and bustle of the men going back and forth was deafening to those used to only to the sounds of the waves lapping the shore and of seagulls calling. The idyllic life of Hastings was now shattered.

One hundred men took turns to build a motte and erect a small, prefabricated fort atop it. It would seem like a normal day, all but for the many men-at-arms attending to their duties. One young stable boy used a long rope, with one end tied to a post, the other end threaded through each horse's bridl. The boy walked the horses slowly round in a field, the beasts having no option but to follow the grazing of the others.

William ordered his officers to go and forage for cattle and sheep so the troops could be fed. To William, the situation was surreal. He'd come to fight a battle, but all he found was a sleepy fishing village.

Bishop Odo, with Giffard by his side, entered the lodgings where William had quartered himself, trying to make sense of the activities from a window. It was small but comfortable, out of the windward direction, and had a huge stone fireplace where water could be boiled and where food was constantly being prepared.

'We're never going to have enough provisions from foraging, William. There's just not enough cattle, sheep, or fowl in this area to support us.' Odo said, who sat looking despairingly at his half brother. 'The men are fed up doing the menial tasks my officers set them. They need to practice for the battle ahead; even you recognize that.' he continued, frustrated.

'It's a constant headache, Odo. We can't go inland just yet. Until our supply lines have been firmly established to support us, we'll have to keep provisioning from the surrounding villages. If we kill the inhabitants, we lose the collective labour force.' he said coughing up a crumb from a bun he'd just consumed. Odo passed him some wine to wash it down.

'Couldn't we bring our own people over here, or at least a portion of them?'

'For what possible reason should we bring them? No. In any event, it would take too long and would create a shortage back home.' William sat with his hands clasped prayer-like, searching for a solution, when one struck him. 'We'll bring the women from the surrounding villages here. They'll cook and do other chores, thus freeing some of our men to run the supplies.'

'That's a good idea, William.' said Giffard.

'That means we will have less chance of brigand attacks on our troops. It

will free up more of our men, and that way we control the area. Food-wise,? we should be sufficient. When we meet Hardrada's forces, we'll at least be in a position of some strength to negotiate the boundaries in our favour. It will allow us to move north swiftly, pulling the network with us. We might have a fight with Sigurdsson, and in that event, we'd be in a stronger position too. That also depends on the reliance factors of the population. They might decide that Sigurdsson is a safer master and side with him. If that happens, we should be prepared to consider our options on boundaries once more. We can't rule a country with just eight thousand troops. We'd be overrun and out numbered twenty to one, Odo.' William placed his feet upon the table and sat back in his chair, contemplating various possible scenarios.

'Yes, I see. That would leave our back door open in Normandy for anyone to enter. This is assuming that what Håkon told us was correct, that Hardrada has indeed taken the land from the north of England to the Midlands.' Odo said looking nervous.

'You are saying what, Odo?' William stared intently at his half brother.

'Well, Hardrada, sorry, I mean Sigurdsson, might not have landed at all.'

'So, tell me and then, why would he have sent Håkon? He certainly wouldn't be sending a man on a mission of bluff, so that we would be reluctant to move against him.' William replied, deeply fascinated at Odo's suggestion.

'A double bluff, perhaps?' Odo speculated, looking for William's expression at the notion.

'That is an interesting thought, Odo, yet conjecture, nonetheless. If Sigurdsson had landed in August and beaten Harold's forces, he would be down here guarding this rich southern coastline by now. He has a powerful fleet of warships that could simply sink our fleet with ease. He has sailor-warriors who know how to fight on water as well as land. This is the first place he would take his battle fleet. And we see nothing- why? There are two possibilities. The first is that Sigurdsson has landed and been defeated, and that Harold has died in battle too. Therefore, there is a void we must fill. In that case we march straight to London and secure the crown. If we're wrong, and the likelihood is that we are, then Harold is alive and waiting for us. There could, of course, be a well-laid trap. He might mean to surround us and wipe us out. No, Odo, I'm wise to that move. I know Harold well. He's a shrewd and very brave man. He knows I wouldn't fall for that trick.' William slowly shook his head. He then thoughtfully took a sip of wine, returning it to the table. 'The other possibility, and the most likely, is that Sigurdsson is indeed in control, but has lost most of his forces to Harold. He's consolidating his gains and is awaiting reinforcements before moving south. If that's the case, there must have been one hell of a battle at York. We must remember this. Håkon said that Harold had not been seen. So where does that leave us?'

In the pregnant silence that followed, Odo looked thoughtful.

'We haven't considered that Harold has defeated Sigurdsson and is marching toward us to do battle as we speak, William. It would answer the question too, as to why we don't see Harold's forces or remnants of them. He's taken them north to fight Sigurdsson, hoping that the winds wouldn't favour us. It's the

only sensible answer.' replied Odo, smugly.

'It's the sort of fight he'd take on, but his troops would be very tired from such a long march, and he couldn't use the battle fleet as the winds were blowing in our favour. The most likely scenario is that Harold is en-route, but he would have to rest his men for at least a week. London is the likeliest place to rest up, where he could reinforce the fyrd. I feel we should stay put. We have a near secure supply line and the ships with which to retreat if we get cornered. When we're ready, we'll move north as soon as we feel we're safe to do so. Do you agree, Odo?' William was looking for input that might change his mind, but nothing was forthcoming.

There came a knock and a shout at the door.

'There's a young messenger, Sire!' Philippe called.

'Bid the messenger enter.' The messenger entered the room breathlessly.

'What's your business, messenger?' William enquired, intrigued.

'Sire, Harold Godwinson has defeated Harald Sigurdsson at Stamford Bridge, near York. He is now in London collecting an army to do battle with you.' he said gasping for air. William stared at him, his head cocked slightly to one side as if he'd misheard him.

'What do you know of the battle, boy?'

'Only that it was an ignominious defeat for Harald Sigurdsson and a great victory for Harold Godwinson. I'm told that not one man of Sigurdsson's forces was left alive, Sire.'

'Well, gentlemen, I suggest that we put our feet up, and await our fate.' The duke moved his gaze toward Giffard. 'Walter, go and organize the women; there's a good chap.' Giffard looked at William with pleading eyes. 'Walter, this is important; it's not demeaning to you. There are going to be some very angry men out there when you start taking the women from their homes, and you're the man to carry this out without falling for the pity of these peasants. We're here to gain a kingdom, not pander to the feelings of lowlife Saxon toads. Now go, get to it!' William waved Giffard from the room.

Giffard strode over to Philippe, who was in conversation with Alan.

'You're to both go into the surrounding villages and bring all the women of suitable age back to the camp. Kill any that refuse or make an attempt to escape. Bring back no children who are under eight years of age. If you come across any aged men, leave them.' said Giffard abruptly. Philippe's face remained expressionless until Giffard had moved off into the distance.

Philippe's placed his hands upon his hips, watching Giffard gather around him a large group of his men, and splitting them into groups of four to be dispersed to the location that he had each sergeant mark on a piece of parchment.

Giffard pointed to the reprobate sergeants Waddle and his sidekick, Snap.

'You two can join up with the Domfront brothers. First of all, I need you for a job.' Philippe as he heard the other officers barking Giffard's instructions to their men. He was forlorn, for there was to be no compromise.

'Do what you must. I don't care too much. Bring back no pregnant women, only fit and able females. Is that clear?' Giffard gazed about and saw that all the men nodded and understood their instructions. 'You're to tell such men as are

there that if they resist, they and their womenfolk will be killed too.' Giffard added. 'Right, split into your groups and go off to the villages, and find your quarry.'

Philippe turned to Alan and sighed.

'Fucking shit! We've been landed with those stupid, arseholes Waddle, and that nasty bastard, Snap. On top of that, we've been allocated a shit job. As for you, Alan, I guess it beats looking after horses all bloody day. Come on. Let's go and see what we can find. For a moment he smiled. Hey, we may get some decent village food inside us, whoa.' Philippe said thinking of the prospect of something other than camp food.

'You know, Philippe, I can't believe they've actually allowed us out to collect of all things? women! Oh well, I suppose we'd better get on with it. Not that I mind too much, of course. At least we may get some decently strong, sweet Saxons ale down us. Do you know how potent that brew is? I'm told that it'll blow the top of your head off.'

'Never mind the ale. Let's just get on and do the job we've been assigned, and slide off into the woods before those to shit heads notice that we're gone. After all, Giffard told them that they were to be with us, but he didn't inform us that we were to be with them.'

Philippe noticed that the day was getting warmer, a far cry from the mist of the morning. He glanced at the swallows swooping to gather up their breakfast and it reminded him of home. His olfactory glands absorbed the smell of food cooking on camp fires, and he wished he'd eaten, regretting having to do night duty and falling asleep, missing his morning meal.

The brothers saddled a good horse each and hoped that they'd packed enough rope. They were soon in the forest, where at least they were free of the nasty horseflies that bit incessantly every part of one's exposed skin. Philippe glanced over his shoulder and saw the two sergeants, Waddle and Snap, had ambled off into the woods on their own, which pleased him to no end. He couldn't stand the sight of Snap, and he'd no time for Waddle either.

Alan and Philippe rode on, snaking through pathless routes, losing Waddle and Snap to find their own way to the surrounding villages that might just happen to be on their route.

As they travelled, Philippe recounted a tale he'd overheard in camp. When Earl Harold had been a captive of Duke William several years before, Harold had been pressed into service on a mission with the duke. While taking part in the operation, Harold, at great personal risk, had heroically saved a man who was sinking rapidly into quicksand. Ironically, the man that had almost cost the earl his own life had been Snap.

They rode on throughout the day, until they found a grassy glade they thought looked rather nice. Philippe halted, dismounted, and looked about.

'We ought to camp here for the night. We can start our business in earnest in the morning. How much rope do we have?.'

'We've a couple of good lengths. That's enough for what we've been sent do.'

'We should be able to bring back at least twenty women Philippe. I just hope they keep quiet, that's all. I hate the thought of a load of wailing females

spitting at us and cursing loudly.' he added as he knelt down to make a small camp fire from the wood and kindling they had collected on their journey through the woods. Soon Alan had cooked a couple of lost chickens they'd caught earlier.

Philippe said his meal was delicious, the best we've had for ages, and that beat hands down that rotting meat they've been feed at camp. The food used to make him up, Philippe had remarked, wondered where they got meat.

Philippe heard a rustling and cracking and told Alan to be quiet.

'Shush, someone's coming.' The two men scrambled into the bushes, forced to leave the camp fire burning by the sudden appearance of intruders.

'Hey, you two. We know you're the Domfront brothers. Come out and show yourselves!'

'Shit! It's that bastard Waddle and his ape Snap.' Philippe muttered as they reappeared.

'So, you two are on your own then. Well, you have Snap and myself for company for the duration. It's a pity you've eaten. We could have done with a bite to eat. No worries, the women can feed us before we bring them back to camp. So, what do you think, Snap?'

'I was never one to miss out on a meal cooked by a woman, Waddle. Then, of course, there's the after-dinner treats. I'm looking forward to the treats.' Snap licked his lips. The evil glint in his eyes more than evident.

Alan felt sick at the prospect of being accompanied by such Godless men. He glanced at Philippe with look of dread and loathing at prospect of having to work with these two evil, mean and spiteful apes.

'As the senior officer.' Waddle announced, 'I say we camp here and assault the village to the east of that rise first thing in the morning.' Waddle had a map drawn on a thin sheepskin hide he'd unrolled, depicting the locations of various villages, and showing the terrain in the vicinity of Hastings. Pointing to a location on the map, Waddle gave instructions as to their approach and how they would achieve their objective. Snap leaned over to Waddle and whispered something in his ear. The brothers didn't quite catch the words, but the word fun was heard as a chuckle came from both men before they ambled away to their mounts to unroll bedding for the evening.

'It looks very much like we're stuck with these two bastards, Alan. I say we stick very close to them because that way they're less likely to get into mischief. In any case, we're the Master Sergeants here. Who the fuck does he think he is? Charlemagne?'

'For Heaven's sake, Philippe, these two don't care who they kill, when they do it, or for that matter, who is with them when they do whatever it is they intend to do. I'll tell you this much, if either of those two so much as lay a finger on a child, it will be the last thing they ever do. So help me, I'll kill them both.'

Philippe began sharpening his blade on a pocket wet-stone. He was unhappy about the day to come. He looked across at his brother with sadness in his eyes. He knew that he must take mothers from their children. He loathed the thought that he must do his duty for his lord and paymaster this way.

'I'm only doing my job, following orders. Shit! One day, it will all be

different. There will be a law-code forbidding this sort of thing in wartime.' He looked around at the lengthening shadows. 'Bugger, the light is failing. Come on, Alan, we'd better get our beds ready.'

Alan and Philippe led their horses into the woods and affixed makeshift rope hammocks between some trees, out of sight from anyone who might come across them. Philippe tethered their horses to a tree, and a short lead from their bridles to the foot end of their slumber rugs.

The night was cool. The brothers tried to sleep but it was fitful, catching the odd half-hour here and there. A few paces away, the snoring of Snap could be heard above the whistling of the wind, the movement of the crisp brown leaves carpeting the ground and the hooting of owls. Not far off, the grunting of a wild boar could be heard--and then a scream as it bit into the flesh of a rival male. As the hours passed, the wind dropped to the lightest breath, and even the owls ceased their hooting as if they, too, had fallen into a deep slumber. There came the sound of a running boar through the forest, and then silence reigned once more.

One of autumn's leaves drifted down, brushing his face waking Philippe with a start. Dawn was just visible through the trees. A slight mist was at knee height off the ground's surface. A deer thundered past, startling him again. His thoughts drifted to those of Alan's wife, Maria, and the children. I hope they're all safe and well. Maria was heartbroken at our leaving, but she understood that we'd have no income whatsoever if we'd stayed on the farm for another year trying to rebuild what the Normans had destroyed. Either that, or we might have been forced into slavery, as many people were. In any case, I didn't want the children to be slaves to some cruel overlord. They would never be able to free themselves. At least Maria and the children are safe with their grandfather. No, it was this or nothing but misery, he thought. he leaned over to gaze at his brother.

'Are you awake, Alan?'

'Yes, but I've not slept a wink all bloody night, Philippe.'

'Well, you snore while you're awake and then.'

'I have had better nights.' he replied, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

'Oh, shit!' Philippe moaned. 'We've the two turds to ride with this morning. I'd forgotten all about them. I can't see any sign of either of them, can you?'

'Listen; I can hear a fire crackling nearby. It's just over there, to your right. Do you see it? Bugger! I was hoping they'd both died in their sleep. Come on, we'd better join them and show a little willingness. They'd only drop us in the shit when we got back to the main camp if they felt we weren't pulling our weight. We'd end up digging out the duke's shit house or worse. That's what happens when you give a little power to a weak man that can't handle it.'

The brothers packed away their sleeping gear and ambled off to a few moments of necessary privacy deeper in the woods. Alan came across a large spread of bluebells, which brought joy to his heart at the sight of them. With a small spade, he dug a defecation hole. He undid his tunic and pulled down his hose. An impromptu song sprang to mind as he did his business amongst the flowers.

'What do you do if you want to have a pooh in a Saxon country garden? Well,

you pull down your pants and you suffocate the ants in a Saxon country garden. and then you take a leaf and you wipe your underneath in a Saxon country garden, and then you take a spade, and you bury what you made, in a Saxon country garden. That's what you do when you want to have a pooh in an Saxon country garden.'

'What the hell was all that noise about, Alan?'

'Oh, I just felt like singing, that's all. It was much better than the blood-and-guts songs the men back at camp feel they need to continue bellowing. It makes a pleasant change, don't you think?' Philippe shook his head in tolerant amusement.

'I suppose we'd better break bread with the gruesome duo, or they'll think we are hiding from them. You've no poison on your person by any chance, do you, Alan? I have a good use for it, if you have.' They chuckled at the thought of ridding themselves of Waddle and Snap in whatever way they could devise, when the sound of dead wood cracking underfoot could be heard, the sound advancing towards them.

'Ah, so you're up and about and then, I see.' Waddle was in good spirits, but Snap seemed quiet and somewhat ill.

'What's the matter with Snap?'

'He's had the shits all night. It serves him right for drinking the local water. He reckons someone had shit in the stream he drank from last night. He'll get over it. Come on. We've a bit of extra rations. You can share with us.' Philippe coughed, trying to suppress a laugh.

'Yes, thanks. I guess it's better than rabbit three times a day.' Alan replied, eager to eat something more substantial. The men sat around a warm fire eating. Waddle talked incessantly, boasting about his past exploits with the duke, when Snap interrupted urgently.

'Shush! We have company. Don't move- jeez- it's a fucking boar.' The boar stood two paces from Waddle's back. It looked mean and was obviously in no mood to make friendly gestures.

'Waddle...? when I say move, you flip over to your left. You got that?' Snap hissed, while his eye was looking into that of the wild animal. Waddle nodded that he understood. The sweat began beading on his forehead and his leggings leaked with warm urine. He was mortified after all of his previous boasting. The boar, sensing fear, rushed forward.

'Move!' Snap yelled, abruptly. Waddle darted to his left, as Snap lunged forward toward the boar with his blade. The boar rose slightly upon seeing Snap. The knife pierced its throat, entering the base of the beast's brain, and the boar fell dead, twitching.

'That was too close for comfort. I owe you one for that.' Waddle felt his urine filled leggings, his embarrassment was obvious. 'Shit!' he cursed, 'I've pissed myself.'

They all sat in stunned silence, still reeling from what they had witnessed. Snap leaned forward to take a good look at the animal.

'Let's get it gutted and hung. We can recover the carcass on the way back.' Snap said in a nonchalant tone. 'The women can carry the meat. It'll give them

something to do.'

An hour later the four men were on the track to the first of the villages shown on Waddle's map. As they rounded a small hillock, they saw below them in a valley, twelve cottages neatly arrayed in two rows on either side of a narrow cart track.

'Right,' Waddle said, 'you know what to do. You two start this side, and Snap and I will take the other.'

'What do you expect us to do with the men?' Alan enquired naively.

'That's about the stupidest question I've ever heard. Kill anyone who opposes you, idiot!' Waddle was in no mood for silly questions and strode on, muttering to himself.

The brothers went to the first of the cottages. Philippe opened the door of the cottage. As he walked inside, he noticed a mother nursing an infant on a cot of straw. The woman was quite startled to see two men enter her home unannounced. He closed that door and turned to Alan.

'Not here, Alan; we'll go to the next one.'

'What if they're all nursing infants, Philippe?'

'Then we go on to the next village until we find someone we can take back with us. I'm not making orphans out of infants, Alan.'

From a short distance, the brothers heard the screams of women. They stood, watching Waddle and Snap dragging two women they had taken and tying them up to a tree. Both men then returned to the cottage. There was silence for a few moments, then the sound of slapping, sobbing, and screams of children in distress.

'I don't like this, Philippe. I'm going to take a look.' They ran across to the doorway of the cottage. The open door gave the brothers a view that horrified them. Snap and Waddle were raping two girls who could not have been more than nine and eleven years of age. Without a word, Alan drew his blade. Philippe looked at Alan and followed suit. In unison, they approached both men who were otherwise engaged in their predatory sexual activities.

Philippe strode briskly and determinedly towards the vile Waddle who'd no idea he'd been observed. With his blade in one hand, he pulled Waddle's head back by his hair. Simultaneously, he slit Waddle's throat. Waddle fell back against his knees, bleeding to the floor, releasing the sobbing child. Concurrently, Alan approached Snap. Snap spun around in time to duck Alan's deathly thrust. Like a rabbit, Snap was out the door and running across the hard, dusty street, toward his horse. Alan slipped on Waddle's blood, then Snap was on his horse, with Philippe in hot pursuit. Alan struggled to his feet, and running outside, threw his knife with deadly aim at the receding Snap. Over and over, the blade spun its way toward its intended victim. The knife fell squarely against Snap's thick leather belt. Its velocity exhausted, the knife fell to the ground. Snap galloped on, disappearing into the forest beyond.

In silence, the brothers returned inside to carry the two weeping girls out to their mothers, and in hesitant Saxon, Alan spoke to the women as softly as possible while untying them.

'They won't bother you again. Go see to your children. I'm so, so sorry that

you had to witness this. Alan said through tears. His shame at being a male almost overwhelmed him.

The brothers walked back into the cottage to drag out the bloody body of the hated paedophile. Alan then retrieved his knife, replacing it into his sheath. Philippe tied Waddle by his feet with rope, hitched the body to his horse. The brothers then dragged Waddle's corpse into the woods, where they covered the cadaver with stones.

The village women stood passively looking on, with relief and astonishment. Has God sent his angels to destroy the devil's work? wondered one woman carrying a baby in her arms. Alan looked at his brother thoughtfully.

'Now what do we do?' Alan asked. He stared at the crowd of women, not knowing what their next move should be. He wanted to approach them and explain their presence. He felt lost, guilty, and ashamed.

Philippe walked away and stood leaning against a tree. He placed his hand on his chin, deep in thought. A few moments later, he noticed Alan approach him. Philippe held his hand up; he needed to collect his thoughts, and didn't want the process disturbed.

'I'm sorry, Alan. I've been thinking. As I see the situation, we have but two options. We can carry on, and bring in the women. That presents the eventuality of Snap demanding our execution, for as Snap sees it, the murder of Waddle. So obviously we can't take the women back to the camp. We could try to make our way back to Normandy and then go home. Even that scenario would be a risky undertaking. We're too well known to be able to bluff our way out and onto a ship. I suppose we should try to defect by joining Harold's forces, unless you have a better idea.'

Alan held Philippe's arm in a vice-like grip.

'Philippe, you're mad! How, in the name of Mary, are we going to tell the Saxons that we want to join them? As soon as they saw our short hair and heard our accent, they'd kill us.'

'You speak a good Saxon, Alan. So we just approach them. You ask to speak to someone in authority and we take it from there. Think of the advantages. We will be paid well by the Saxons. They're bound to win the forthcoming battle. Their forces must surely outnumber William's ten to one. They have a whole country to call upon. I heard one of Norman lords say that the Saxons could gather one-hundred thousand men.' Alan glanced down the street at the women gazing in awe back at them.

'The odds are greatly against us, and then. We're both in great shit, either way. Duke William expects us to win a battle with odds like that against us! I wish someone had told me that before we sailed. So be it Philippe, but how do we find the Saxons forces? No one has seen them since we've been here.'

'I take it we are in agreement and then?' Philippe replied. 'This is a very dangerous chance we are taking. Do you understand that? If our own side catches us, it will be the last sunrise for us. Snap will have made his report, and they will send out a party to search for us. I'm sure of that. What's more, they will kill everyone here too.' Philippe was shaking his head slowly, his depression becoming visibly apparent.

Alan took the map from Waddle's saddlebag, while Philippe tied the dead man's horse to a tree. They walked some way from the village and sat down on a log to resume discussing their options.

'Perhaps,' Alan said, hopefully, 'we can return to the village and ask the women to show us a bit of mercy in return, by helping us to be hired by the Saxons.'

'Or, they could call out such men they have from other villages, then hang us! They think we're Normans, for Heavens sake!' Philippe said, tersely. Sometimes, you're so fucking naïve, Alan. But he kept his thought to himself and began sharpening his knife with a small stone. He felt sick and angry, and began to curse through his teeth. 'They've had plenty of time to do that by now. We're the enemy. Don't you forget that. I guess we'll just have to take our chances and see what happens. Die here now, or die later on the field of battle. Take your pick, Alan.' Philippe paused, thoughtful. 'We go back to the village. Agreed?'

'Yes, agreed!' Philippe's smile was infectious. 'We'll think of something, I'm sure, but let's eat first.'

They made their way to the ridge above the village, where Alan cooked some roots over a fire, while Philippe sliced what was left of their food into manageable portions, and discussed their situation as they ate.

'They'll come looking for us tomorrow. They know where we are, too.'

'Then we've made the right decision to go back to the village. As I see it, we can ask the women to hide us. If they agree, and there's nothing to indicate, so far that they wouldn't. We've no option but to place ourselves upon their mercy.'

'Did you notice that the map Snap had didn't have the village's location marked on it?' Philippe said smiling.

'Philippe, we came upon the village quite by accident. There's a chance that Snap mightn't find it again. Also, did you notice that the village is hidden in a valley and surrounded by thick forest? We're saved!'

Five hundred paces away, a woman was addressing the other village women gathered around her.

'I've no idea who those two men were, but they weren't Normans or Saxons. All I know is, they saved us from the two bastards who harmed our children.'

Ebba, a tall, blond woman with piercing blue eyes, interrupted the woman's speech.

'Whatever has happened here this morning, it proves the Normans know we're here, and will come back to take us into slavery. What of our men? Where are they? No one has heard from them since they left to join King Harold.' Ebba placed her hand upon her hips. She stared at her fellow village women, looking for views and answers to recent events.

'That's so.' said another voice from the gathering. 'The two Normans just rode in here without a care. If they can do that, there are more to come. We're totally unprotected.'

As the rest of the women looked around at each other, in renewed fear, they all made the decision to take their meeting into the communal barn to discuss their situation further. The younger children were told to sit quietly, while the older children took charge and listened, learning while the meeting was in progress.

As the hours passed Alan sharpened his blade to a fine edge. His knife was polished and glistened in the sun. He took a hair and sliced the strand in two, and smiled, satisfied at a job well done. "Do you think they'll help us, Philippe?"

'I'm not going to even guess. We've made the decision to contact them, so we may as well go down and see if they will allow us some connection with the Saxons forces. They're bound to have some communication with their men.' He was feeling apprehensive. He knew, that in the eyes of the duke, in killing Waddle, they'd committed a great wrong. He nudged Alan, "Oh, come on. We can't stay here all day." he said, then got to his feet, covered the fire with earth. They gathered up their belongings and led the three horses down into the valley, careful not to alarm anyone as they approached the village. Philippe looked over his shoulder and took one last look at the grassy glade that had been so peaceful as it disappeared behind them.

'Perhaps we could go to Scotland.' said Alan, with an almost serious look that changed to a grin. They both laughed.

'We don't even know where Scotland is, Alan.'

As the brothers came within a hundred paces of the women, Philippe stopped dead in his tracks, his arm holding Alan back.

'What do you think is going on down there, Alan?'

'Shit! I don't believe this is happening!' The astonishment upon Philippe's face said it all. Two scruffy looking Bretons had found the village, and had taken two of the women, tied them with their arms outstretched, and were raping them over a hitching post. The other women were tied, defenceless to a long rope that was tethered between two trees. The women were looking on with expressions of resigned helplessness. There was absolutely nothing the women could do, except weep loudly.

Philippe strode forward menacingly, followed closely by Alan. Yet again, Philippe and Alan took out their blades. The glint from their implements glistened in the sun and with grim determination, the brothers approached the two rapists. The reflection from the blades caught the eye of one of the bound women. She nudged her neighbour, who in turn, did the same, until all the women were monitoring the brother's approach. They watched as the brothers each chose a victim. The simultaneous and determined slash of the blades upon the throats of the two Breton rapists ended the victims, ordeal as two corpses fell to the ground.

Alan felt sick to the core as he retched. God will surely punish me for my cold-blooded actions this day. He fell to his knees, crossing himself. Philippe grasped his arm and lifted him to his feet. Alan looked at his bloodied hands and then gazed with anguished eyes into his brother's face.

'It was the right thing, Alan. We did God's work in taking the devil's disciples from this earth. There is no shame in that, my brother. Now we must assist these people. Go to the horse and get the rope while I calm these distressed women.'

Alan nodded. He knew his brother's words had reasoned judgement. He moved off to where the villains' horses were tethered. He took a rope from one of the horses and strode back to the body of the man whose life he'd just taken. He stood looking at the bloody, lifeless corpse that lay before him.

'Bastard!' he muttered. 'Let the devil take you to the fires of damnation!' He bent down and tied the rope around his victim's legs. He walked across to the astonished women and seeing that Philippe had untied them from their bondage, approached the mother of one of the raped children. He offered her the rope.

'Over the tree, look.' Philippe pointed to an old oak tree that had a long, thick branch. His gesticulations fell on stony ground.

'They're Saxons Philippe, remember.' Alan called. 'I'll tell them what to do.' He smiled at her and repeated Philippe's words to her in English.

The petrified woman just stared at them, looking totally bewildered. She then walked toward the tree, when one of the raped women took hold of the rope from her. In a moment the rope was over the branch. One after another the women came forward and pulled on the rope. The corpse rose into the air, swinging around and around. Philippe took hold of the rope, making it secure.

'They deserve retribution, Alan. Let them release their anger.'

Alan stood next to Philippe, staring aghast at the ferocity of anger they were witnessing. The women began to spit at the swinging corpse, and with sticks, whipped at it. One woman began shouting abuse at the now lifeless body.

From amongst the seething mob, another woman pushed her way forward. She was holding a sharp butchering knife. She slit off the clothes of the bloody cadaver, lifted the genitals, and with one swift cutting motion, severed the raping cluster away. She strode briskly over to the pigs.

'These are for the swine!' she called, tossing genitalia over into the sty. She walked back slowly, her eyes avoiding the rapists. She approached the brothers wearily. Her hands outstretched, she took their hands in hers.

'We're grateful to you kind men. Without your help we would be enslaved to whatever fate the Normans had in store for us. Please, come and sit with us. I want to know all about you.' She stepped back a couple of paces, staring at them searchingly, scanning for the differences from all the other men she'd encountered in the past.

Philippe stood, merely watching, unknowing the Saxon's English tongue as his brother. He smiled at the kind face of the woman. He glanced at Alan, shrugged and smiled again as he turned once more to face the woman.

'What's the matter with this man? Is he deaf?' she asked, looking somewhat puzzled. She still hadn't quite come to terms with this vision. She'd seen the same two men twice on the same day, saving the women from harm for a second time. She took hold of Philippe's hand and led him to a cottage. Philippe covertly glanced at her form. She was tall, with light brown hair and amply proportioned. As they disappeared inside, another woman stepped forward. It was

the mother of the children they'd saved earlier that morning.

'Come with me. We're grateful for your help. You and your friend have done more for us than any men have done since our own left with the king.' The woman held onto Alan's hand and led him to her own cottage, where just a couple of hours before, her daughters had been the victims of Waddle and Snap.

'Madam, I must first tell you one thing. I am a defector.'

'A defector- what is a defector?' she asked with a confused look.

'Before I explain our actions to you, I have to ask you to rejoin me with my brother, Philippe. He doesn't speak your English tongue. He'll be confused, and he might distress the woman who has taken him into her cottage.' As the words left his mouth, the door opened and there stood Philippe. Beside him stood the woman who'd led him away.

'Acha. We have to talk.'

Philippe was bemused. He really hadn't a clue what to do, except to watch.

'My name is Rricula. You saved my daughters this morning. This woman who took your brother, Philippe, to her home is Acha. The two men you killed raped this woman and her daughter, Emma. Please, you must tell me about yourself and your brother. Where are you from, why are you here, and..?'

With a wave of his hand, Alan cut short Rricula's questions.

'There are too many questions, and too soon. Please, be patient. We have a story, and you'll need to understand. What I have to tell you might confuse you, but I would ask that you give me the opportunity to explain our situation. It's not easy for me to speak in your English dialect, for my own tongue is French, and you speak too quickly for me.'

Acha gasped. She was now in a state of utter astonishment. She stared at the men standing before her, her eyes wide with a mixture of excitement and wonderment. She wanted to know who were these two angels, and where did they come from? Did they have families? What's more, what were they doing here?

Alan cleared his throat.

'My name is Alan Domfront, and this is my brother, Philippe. We were forced by dire circumstance to join the forces of Duke William.' Alan told their story to the two women, who sat in dumbfounded silence at the tale that unfolded.

Rricula grasped Alan's hand, composing her thoughts.

'Alan, you know that the women of this village are grateful to you and your brother for all you've done. I'll speak to the other women about your situation. You're certainly not Normans, nor inhuman. Indeed, you've demonstrated to us that you are compassionate men. As for Acha and myself, we will help you and hide you for as long as you wish to stay.'

'Thank you, Rricula, and you, too, Acha. We'll help you in any way we can. But the raiders might come back, and often. So we must find a way to make the village look deserted. Are you willing to go along with any plan that Philippe and I can conceive?' Rricula glanced at Acha. Acha, smiling nodded her approval. She once more turned to Alan.

'We've no option Alan. From our experience of your good deeds, I feel we can trust your judgement.' Rricula leaned forward and kissed his cheek, and then threw her arms around him, squeezing tightly. She looked across at the bemused

Philippe and beckoned for him to come to her. She took his hand and kissed his cheek, too. Acha took Philippe's hand in hers and began to speak softly to him.

'Philippe, I know you can't understand my words. Your brother will tell you what I have said, but from my heart, I thank you.' Alan translated as Acha gave her thanks to Philippe. She then looked at Alan. 'Alan, we must find you a place to sleep, and a safe place to hide. You'll wait here while Ricula and I go speak with another women. I know one woman, Ebba, who speaks your tongue, and I'm sure she'll help Philippe feel very comfortable.' She giggled as she and Ricula exited from the cottage, leaving the brothers alone.

'What's going on, Alan? It is obvious she was grateful to us, but what happens now? Where do we go from here?'

'It looks as if we've gained allies here. We'll be safe for a little while, but we'll have to look after these women and keep them from harm. That's not going to be as easy as it was this morning. I can't see these women allowing themselves to be raped just so that we can sneak up from behind and kill any attackers. No, the next assault we'll have to fight face to face; they'll be ready for a fight; of that, I'm sure. I'm not a coward, Philippe, but the men we trained with are professionals--they know how to fight and how to defend themselves.'

'Then we must find another way to protect these women. After all, we need them as much as they need us. They look upon us now as heroes, and reluctant ones at that.' Philippe's eyes narrowed as he sat, deep in thought.

'You know, I have an idea? as silly as it might sound. We could fool the Normans very easily. We merely make a sign that says '*plague-keep away*.' How does that sound?' Alan's arm made an expansive sweep, creating an imaginary sign.

'Brilliant! That could just work; but in Norman and Breton, not English. That way no one will ignore it, and the fear of plague will save us for sure. But what if it is ignored?'

'We'll deal with that situation as it arises. First of all, we need to make the sign, and quick, too. IDIOT! None of them can read!' Alan laughed loudly.

'I was joking, Philippe.'

'Yes, I knew you were.' Philippe threw Alan a wry grin and then yawned, deeply. It was the first of many over the next few minutes. He rested his head on a warm down-filled pillow, and drifted off to sleep with Alan still talking to him.

Noticing that his brother was now in another world, he muttered to himself the Lord's Prayer and covered his brother with a woollen blanket.

'Oh well, I may as well get my head down too. It's been a long, hard day.' Alan muttered to himself before he too, drifted off to sleep.

Some time later, the door opened. Three women entered to find the brothers snoring loudly. Acha, Ricula, and Ebba approached and studied the sleeping duo.

'They're sound asleep, bless their hearts.' Ebba said smiling lovingly down at Philippe.

'Why, Ebba. I do believe you've taken a fancy to one of them.' Ricula said with a smile.

'Well, when I saw the tall one, Philippe, my tummy went all butterflies. Isn't he a handsome man? His brother is not bad looking, either. Tell me, Rricula, does Philippe have a woman?' Ebba asked shyly.

'Why Ebba, I do believe you're blushing. Philippe really has had an effect upon you, and that's no mistake. The poor man's wife is dead. Now, I think we should allow them to sleep a while longer. After all, they've had a hectic day. I know we'll be safe with them here. Come. Follow me. We shall prepare a meal for when they awaken.' Rricula said, smiling. The three women left the cottage as quietly as they had entered, leaving Alan and Philippe to their dreams.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Swein stood beside Gyrth, looking down at the grave of the late King Edward. The white tombstone, with only the words *Edwardi Regum Anglorum* engraved upon it, gave the stone a somewhat naked appearance. The brothers looked on, as the monks, having finished their chants, filed out of the abbey leaving them quite alone. Swein mused for a moment, wondering if the soul of Edward was in purgatory or in paradise.

'He didn't get much accomplished in his reign. All that's left for those many years are just the carved words, Edward, King of England, on a plain stone. I think it's rather sad when you consider how long he sat upon the throne.' He gazed reflectively at Gyrth, searching for the right words with which to open the debate he so needed to help him clear his mind of the clutter of the past few days.

'I can't help wondering what Edward would have thought about all this shit, Gyrth. That bastard knew what he was doing. He planned for all this to happen. He knew we would have to fight to keep England under English rule. I'm sure he did it to punish us. He was spiteful to the very end. That's what comes of being half bloody Norman!'

Gyrth managed to shake off the bitterness that appeared to be a constant companion with his brother. He'd long ago recognized that they were opposite in temperament. He felt Swein's sadness, yet even though he was as hard as iron, he saw that nothing ever jarred Swein, except, perhaps a woman.

'It's time, Gyrth to consolidate our thoughts, not to sit on our laurels.' He thumped a wooden beam, only to see it shudder, putting to fright the roosting birds above.

'We need to discuss what happens from here onwards.'

Swein wasn't listening; he was looking up at the oak beams. He noticed the carving of the green man, the symbol of fertility, of leaf motifs, the symbols that ensured a good harvest, and eternal hope.

'Have you ever seen the great stone churches in France, Gyrth? They're magnificent and a credit to the masons who built them. They're much larger than we have here in England.' Swein glanced at Gyrth and realized that his brother would rather talk of other things.

'I'm sorry, Gyrth, my thoughts were elsewhere. Did you say something?'

'Well, as you've finally noticed that I'm here, could we discuss what happens now?' asked Gyrth shaking his head slowly, a forlorn look settling upon his

face.

'The long march down to London has taken its toll on the men who've fought with us at Stamford Bridge. Many are ill and have dropped out to find their way back to their homes. Of those still with us, many are just plain tired, and to be frank, Swein, so am I.'

Swein caught Gyrth's mood and moved to accommodate his viewpoint.

'You can't blame the men for going to see their families. They had two hard-fought battles and a long march from York. Of course they're tired. What else did Harold expect? Three thousand men just walked away. All we have left are the surviving housecarls and a few select fyrd. It's depressing, Gyrth, bloody depressing.' Swein sighed. He looked up to see a flock of sparrows high up in the roof searching for a way out. We're like those birds, he thought.

Gyrth halted and stood watching as his brother ambled about the abbey aimlessly, deep in thought. Sometimes, my brother, it's best to keep one's thoughts to one's self.

Swein strolled down the knave, through the chancel, and knelt beneath the high altar. He mumbled a prayer and crossed himself. He stood up, and turned to look at his brother.

Gyrth strode towards him. As he neared him, he noticed a tear well up in Swein's eyes. He placed a hand on his arm and smiled.

'Whatever your problem is, Swein, I'm sure that given time, everything will be all right.'

Swein smiled almost apologetically; he looked embarrassed.

'That was for Tostig. Despite his cowardice and being on the wrong side, he was never my enemy, in spite of his all too often senseless tirades. All he ever wanted was his earldom back and to spend time with Edward. I never had a problem with his sexuality, though I'd rather he'd been like us, in that respect.' Swein's expression suddenly changed for a moment as he grinned.

'Ha! His homosexuality meant more women for me!' Swein's untimely and fiendish humour fell on stony ground, as he noticed Gyrth staring at him with a vacant expression.

Gyrth carefully changed the subject, steering the topic round to that of Harold. He didn't want to be reminded of Tostig's contumacious character.

'Where's Harold? He is accessible, I hope. The strain is telling on him, in case you hadn't noticed, Swein. he said, looking as depressed as his brother.

'He was in his private quarters, with Stigand. They had things they needed to discuss. Harold wants a memorial to his fallen warriors sung in the abbey. I feel we ought to be with him for a little while. He's had two days of solitude and wouldn't speak to anyone, even to our sister. As for that Swanneck woman, she's keeping out of his way, at least for now. We'd better go and see he. It's about time we dug him out of his depression.'

As they left the abbey to walk across to the king's palace, it began to rain heavily. The cobbled street with heavy rivulets streaming haphazardly near the entrance to the palace brought with it the detritus of human and animal waste. Gyrth took off his footwear and walked through the water, beckoning to his brother to follow.

'I'm no duck either,' said Gyrth, 'but we have work to do.'

Without knocking, they entered the king's private quarters to see Harold stalking around the room like a caged animal in pain, striding from wall to wall, and it irritated Gyrth to the point of distraction. He approached Harold and stood in his path, stopping him in his tracks.

'Well, what is it, Gyrth? Say what you need, then leave me in peace,' Harold said, clearly irritated by Gyrth's intervention into his thought processes.

'Are you going to be this way for the rest of your life, Harold? Tostig is dead. He died a glorious death.' Gyrth lied, reminding himself of Tostig's cowardly attempt at escape from the battlefield at Riccall, and how he'd hidden the truth from Harold. 'You should be proud that he stuck to a principle and saw it through, even if it was the wrong decision. He paid the ultimate price for his error. He died as a warrior should die? honourably. It's how our father would have wished. What is done is done, and that's all there is to it!'

Harold nodded, placed his hand upon Gyrth's shoulder and stared directly into his eyes.

I appreciate your bluntness, forthrightness and sincerity Gyrth. You're right, of course; you usually are.' He smiled as he turned to look at Swein and saw the sadness in him too. 'I've organized a memorial in the abbey for our fallen men. They too, died honourably, it's the least I can do for them. I've seen too, the families of our fallen comrades will be looked after by way of a pension. For now we must take a good look at our situation. Be seated; I need your opinion and council.' Harold glanced at the door as he heard the heavy footsteps of someone approaching quickly down the corridor.

Without knocking, Leofwine entered the room, completely out of breath. Swein turned to look at him, his eyes narrowed. He jerked his head toward Harold in warning, indicating that the king was in no mood for more bad news. Leofwine, not noticing Swein's intention, blundered onward.

'Harold, you need to know that Duke William is at Hastings! What's more, there's an envoy arrived from the duke and he's waiting outside.' Harold glared at the floor as he kicked a rolled parchment across the room.

'I guessed as much. You'd better show him to the audience chamber, and we can hear what he has to say.'

Leofwine made his exit, allowing Swein, who glared at him, to close the door gently behind him. In the corridor, Leofwine motioned the monk to follow him to the king's audience chamber.

'Where are you from, monk?' he asked, looking him up and down. Leofwine noticed that the monk was well rounded, and of average height. But couldn't help noticing that the well-rounded monk had a bright red face that sported purple veins running down his cheeks in lighting strokes, like a ripe apple, giving him a comic aura.

'For what it's worth to you, I'm Hugh Margot, from Fécamp. You should be careful with your tongue young man. In my king's court, I'm a man of some standing!' Margot's overt insolent pride struck a nerve, and Leofwine wanted to hit him, but thought better of it. He thought that the monk's attitude was arrogant to the core. His diplomatic skills are akin to a man holding his

neighbour's balls at a wedding, he thought, and gazed at the monk with the disdain he normally reserved for fleas.

Harold took another route to the audience chamber, where he seated himself in his royal chair. He watched the man closely as the monk strode purposefully through the door, and headed straight toward him.

'Am I to understand that you're Harold Godwinson?' Hugh Margot asked in a demeaning and demanding tone. Hugh stood with his arms folded, feet apart, and chest protruding, looking the king directly in the eyes.

Harold sat silently waiting while taking the measure of the man before him.

'And you are?' Harold asked leaning forward." This monk's tone would aggravate the patience of a saint, he thought.

'I am Hugh Margot, of course, my king's ambassador. My lord, King William of England, demands that you give me the crown, which I am to take back to him. I'm to tell you that you and your kindred will be given safe passage to Scotland. That is, you're banished forthwith from ever returning to my lord's kingdom.' Hugh's nose twitched, and his lips pursed.

'Is that so.' Harold replied, softly. His eyes narrowed and he leaned forward glaring at the fat oaf.

'Yes, it is so. You shall give the crown to me now, and I will be on my way.' Margot insisted. Margot's posture and attitude were so obnoxious it crawled deeply under Harold's skin and he disliked the monk intensely.

'Obviously the duke is too cowardly to come and get it himself. So he sends a toad such as you to do the work of a man. I take it you are a real toad?' he said sarcastically, glancing at his brothers, as they all stood grinning.

'It is you who are the usurping toad, Godwinson. Come on, hand over the crown.' he demanded, holding out his hand, and I'll be gone. My king gives you two days to remove yourselves from his kingdom, by which time he expects to be here, in London, to take his rightful place in this palace. Your archbishop shall go too. He is persona none gratis and will be replaced by one of my king's own. Your lands and gold now belong to my king. When you leave, you're to take nothing with you, and you will be escorted to the Scottish border. I take it what I have been told to communicate to is abundantly clear?'

'Oh, abundantly clear.' Harold's face began to boil with rage, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets. He rose to his feet and withdrew his sword. 'I'm going to kill this bastard for his gall. How dare you have such a lack of respect for my person, office, and the crown of England!'

Gyrth stepped in just as Harold was about to deliver the blow, grabbing Harold's arm and struggling to contain him.

'Harold! This man is an envoy, a man of God! He should be treated with respect for his office, not his message.' Gyrth nodded at a guard to take hold of the monk and eject him.

'Get this fat loaf out of my sight now, or by the beard of Satan I will burn him alive!' Harold was shaking in anger, his rage overcoming his normal passive sensibilities. 'Don't you ever stop me again, Gyrth, or I will kill you, too! Is that understood!?'

Margot was in a state of near collapse, sweating profusely as the guard

forcibly marched the monk to the doorway, when Swein took over the guard's charge and placed his boot firmly on the Margot's backside, sending the monk sprawling out the door to land upon his face, in the wet courtyard.

Harold sat down, still fuming.

'I don't want this idiot running loose in my kingdom!' At that moment, Harold heard some commotion and looked up to see what was happening outside. Swein and Leofwine were engaged in some argument with another monk asking for entry to the king. The newcomer was profusely apologizing for the conduct of his colleague and begged to be granted an audience. Harold was curious. He took a quill-pen and began to write furiously on parchment.

'I have written my reply to your master, and the letter reads thus.'

Harold held out the message and read its contents aloud.

'You have come into this land with, I know not what, temerity. I recall that King Edward, at first, appointed you as heir to the Kingdom of England. I well remember that I was sent by the king to Normandy to give you assurance of the succession. But that king, who was my lord, acting fully within his rights, bestowed on me the kingdom on his deathbed. Moreover, ever since the time when the blessed Augustine came to these shores, it has been the unbroken custom of the English to treat deathbed bequests as inviolable. It is, therefore, with justice, that I bid you return with your followers, to your own country. Otherwise, I will have to break the friendship and the pacts I made with you in Normandy. I leave the choice to you.'

'Harold Rex.'

Harold rolled up the parchment and requested a page to set the royal seal upon it with hot wax. While the king waited for the seal he saw the the fat monk outside the door and he glared at Margot, seething hatred. When the letter was sealed, Harold took it from the page, and gave the message to the young monk with instructions.

'Take this to your master. It is my full and inviolable answer.' Harold gestured towards Hugh Margot. 'Get that wretched maggot out of my kingdom before I cut him into a thousand pieces!' he said, seething through his teeth, his saliva falling on the monk's habit.

The monk, accepting the roll from Harold's hands bowed and left. The two monks mounted their steeds to begin the journey back to Hastings. When the monks were some way down the road and out of sight the young monk heard Margot laughing. The young monk pursed his lips in a silent whistle while looking across at his companion, and with a sickly smile, he handed the communiqué to Hugh Margot.

'I think *YOU* should be the one to deliver this particular message to the duke. You're his ambassador, remember?'

Harold sat pondering, then turned his gaze to his brothers.

'We need to take all the men we have to Hastings. I feel that my leaving Morcar and Edwin in York might have been a mistake. They should know the consequences of deceit by now. Wulfnoth, send a messenger to Morcar. Tell him to bring his men down to Hastings immediately.'" he ordered with a tone of

irritation in his voice. Wulfnoth stepped forward to take the king's seal as Harold wrote upon the parchment.

'The message will be sent within the hour, Harold.' said Wulfnoth, as he left the room, calling for messengers to stand ready to ride north.

Harold turned to Leofwine and grasped his arm.

'So, what other knowledge do you possess, Leofwine; um?'

'Well, our information is that the duke landed at Hastings a week ago. He set up a base and hasn't moved inland since he arrived, but of course, this may have changed since we received that news.'

'William is wondering where we are, no doubt.' he replied with a wry smile.

Gyrth stood up, strolled toward the door, and looked out across the Thames River.

'We've an ideal opportunity to have him then. If he's still at Hastings and he hasn't moved inland, then it can mean only one thing. He's not a clue what to do next.'

'This news has to be a couple of days old. We should assume nothing for the moment. What should our next move be in your estimation, Gyrth?'

'Draw him inland, of course. We cut off his line of supply and surround him. If we're able to gather absolutely every fyrdsman together, then we'll outnumber him at least three to one. We know the lay of the land and control all approaches; he doesn't. The duke is on foreign soil, and we're on home ground, so we've the advantage Harold.'

Harold rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

'Your point is well put, Gyrth. Drawing him inland might be dangerous though. He can spread his forces and split our numbers into manageable sizes. We don't have the officers we once had. We lost too many housecarls and our best sergeants at Stamford Bridge.' Harold held up his hand. 'No! If they're still in the Hastings area, we've a chance of cornering them, and their only escape would be the sea. I feel that a pitched battle is the correct course of action, a once-and-for-all fight to the death. The advantages would be many. He would be outclassed, out manned and defeated. We would then have his horses, his ships, his armour, and perhaps, a ransom for each high-born captive. Maybe a new territory would be ours, too- Normandy, even.' Swein grinned, then took the floor with his usual swagger.

'There's another way, Harold. We have Oswulf. He has a fine fleet ready to sail, plus the ships we took from Sigurdsson. He could cut off any supply line that the bastard has arranged.' Harold chuckled aloud, pointing to the door.

'Wet your finger, Swein. Then put your finger outside the door.' he advised, and watched as Swein obligingly did so.

'We can't sail south against the wind, Swein.'

Swein sported a sheepish look, and nodded.

'I see your point, Harold.' replied Swein. He obligingly sat down, deciding to listen rather than participate any further.

'The longer we wait, the more time William has for gathering reinforcements. He has to get his supply line firmly established. The duke needs to feed his forces. To do this they'll have to ravish the area to get what they need. It's a

matter of logistics Gyrth, pure and simple. My only worry is that he might have begun to march on London or Winchester. In that case, we'd have to make sure that if he came here, we'd corner him. That is, allow him to enter the city, and not let him out. Queen Edith has enough forces at Winchester and more than enough money to pay for extra mercenaries she could hire from Wales and Ireland. She could withstand a prolonged siege until we can do something about that menace.'

Wulfnoth re-entered the room with a superior look about him.

'I've dispatched the messengers Harold, and set up a line with reliable riders every twelve miles to see what's afoot at Hastings. We should have hourly reports of the situation.' Harold nodded, smiling at his youngest brother.

'You're not just a pretty face then Wulfnoth. I can see I'm going to have to look after my throne.' Harold laughed loudly, patted him on the shoulder, and looked about the room. 'We're agreed we march toward Hastings in the morning.' he said, with another beaming smile, relishing the thought of kicking the backside of the *bastard* and allowing him just seven feet of English soil.

'It rather looks that way,' Gyrth said, 'but I do have strong reservations.'

'There's no other alternative.' Swein said, shrugging in resignation.

'I'll go muster the men and prepare them for the march in the morning.'

Leofwine informed the king he would do as he required as he left the room.

The morning was warm, the mist rising slowly from the morning dew. The smell of cooking and the smoke rising in the almost still air made it a pleasant one for all who geared up for the march south to Hastings. The old Roman roads were smooth from the traffic that used them, with a thick moss that made the walking easy and comfortable underfoot.

Gyrth sat uncomfortably in his saddle. He'd a boil on his backside that made him feel very sore. He leaned over and looked at Harold.

'What's the first pick-up point, Harold?' He noticed the smile on his face as his king looked up at him. He has it all worked out, thought Gyrth, and he sensed the aura of self-satisfaction in his brother, and felt it a-far-cry from the last few days when the stress of the previous obstacles was beginning to tell on him that gave a renewed confidence.

'Waltham Abbey, replied Harold, 'We should have four hundred waiting for us, by the time we get there. The men know what's expected of them. These men are my own housecarls. They're the best there are.' Harold continued, confidently, seeing that Gyrth was impressed.

'I'm informed that there are four thousand fyrd at Tunbridge Wells. Is that correct?'

'Yes, they have been on standby since June, but they had to bring in the harvest. As you know, I disbanded the fyrd and the navy for that reason. In any case, they would have used up their forty-two days service, and might have been reluctant to leave their farms to fight. As it stands, they've mustered as they were asked.'

'You know, the men we've brought with us- they've been bloodied and hardened at Stamford Bridge. If they fight the bastard's forces as they did against

Sigurdsson, we should be mighty pleased we have them with us.' Harold smiled and whistled a tune, this time accompanied by a wooden flute played by a man walking just behind his king's steed.

A day's walking distance from Harold, three housecarls made their way from their homestead in Doddington toward the designated assembly point. Each had a pony that carried his equipment. They were hoping to meet up with their fellow housecarls before they arrived at Tunbridge Wells, but they were late because one of the horses threw a shoe.

'Hey, Boisil, we should be on the route to Netherfield. This is the road over the Downs to Penthurst.' called Heribert to his companion.

'I agree. Look, the sun is in the west, so we must move in a southerly direction. Am I not correct Thridred?' Boisil took out a map, laid the parchment on the ground and took out his load-stone and thread. The small iron-laden rock always fascinated him; often he wondered how its trusted magic worked.

'Umm?- we need to go in that direction, a little more east from this point. We should join the Roman road, then it's due south until we reach Tunbridge.' replied Thridred, confidently.

'I'm not sure, but if you two think that the correct route is in that direction, then I guess I've no choice but to go along with it. How is your horse Heribert?' asked Boisil noting a concerned look in Heribert's demeanour.

'The horse is doing well, all things considered. As long as we walk and keep his load light, then he'll be fine, I'm sure. Though I feel if we rest up here, we can finish our journey in the morning. Harold will be resting our boys for a short while, so we should be on time not to miss the arse kicking.'

All three laughed at the remark as they unloaded their ponies and set up camp. Boisil started a fire to cook a couple of rabbits they'd caught earlier. He noticed the water carriers were all but empty.

'We need something to boil these rabbits in, and some wine or fresh water to drink, so if you two boys would nip off and find some beverage from a local village, I'll see to skinning the rabbits.' Boisil was renowned for his exceptional culinary skills. He always made good use of any meat, though he preferred venison.

Heribert and Thridred left Boisil to his skinning and strolled off looking for a village, mindful of any Normans that may have billeted themselves on some unsuspecting ladies. Each man took along with him a scramseax and a two-handed battle-axe. They soon found a path and decided to follow it, thinking that it might lead them to a nearby village or hamlet. It was overgrown, yet had been used recently by people, not deer or wild boar. There were hawthorn bushes on either side backed up with holly trees. They noticed some oak trees had been felled earlier in the year and felt confident that a village was nearby. It was still warm and the humidity was quite high and it brought out the late summer midges to plague them as they walked down the incline. Heribert stooped low to look at the ground.

'I can see there have been heavy horses down here, Thridred, newly shod, too. Someone's walked here alongside them. These tracks aren't more than two days

old, I'd say.'

'War horses, perhaps? Then we should be cautious. If there are Normans here, we'd better be ready for some head-rolling.' Thridred replied, as he took out a sharpening stone and began putting a fine edge upon his axe. 'It's about time this lady did some housework and had some blood on her edge.' he said, grinning.

Over a ridge they saw smoke rising low over the valley, more like a rolling fog than wood smoke. The smell of burning wood and food was unmistakable. They made their way toward the edge of the village, which, apart from the path leading to it, appeared well hidden. They readied themselves for a fight, wary that a platoon of Normans might have been billeted there. As they drew nearer to the village, they saw two bodies hanging by their legs from the trees. Thridred stopped dead in his tracks. His arm flew out stopping Heribert.

'Shit! The bloody Normans are here.' Heribert seethed between his teeth, as he pulled on his brother's arm. He withdrew his sharp scramseax as they merged into the bushes. Thridred held his finger to his lips.

'I think that we ought to just wait and see what happens.' Heribert indicated with sign language that they withdraw to discuss the situation, and they made their way silently deeper into the thicket.

'They're Normans hanging in the trees, Heribert, not English. Did you notice the hair? It was shaved right up the back of the neck. They're Normans, right enough, or I'm a slave to a donkey.' Thridred said confidently, as he pulled down and peered through a gorse bush.

'Are you sure? To be honest, I didn't take a great deal of notice. I just saw dead men swinging on the branches.'

'I think we would be safe to enter the village, but I feel we ought to keep our wits about us, just in case. It may be punishment for some crime by the Normans own men, perhaps. We can't take a chance. We ought to find a spot where we can observe the village for a while without detection. Come on, lets move in a little closer to- Err!' something caught Thridred's leg. The trip was set off. The sprung branch took both men upside down into the air, their heads now four feet off the ground. A long piece of cord led to one of the cottages, where it tugged on an iron pot that fell off a log, which hit an old bronze church bell set up to give an alarm.

Down in the village, Alan heard the alarm. He glanced over to see the iron pot on the ground, and saw that the signal rope was taut.

'What the-?' He ceased splitting his log and looked again to where they had set their trap.

'It looks like we have visitors, Philippe!' He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. He reached for his sharpened blade and picked up a smaller axe from the log pile, and slid the shaft into his belt.

'It might be a deer. All the same, we ought to approach with extreme caution. Should we get the girls to go and take a look? We can follow them in case of any trouble? If it's the Normans, we can catch them off guard from the rear and deal with them. Agreed?' Philippe asked, looking for approval.

'That's a sound idea, little brother. I hope the women don't mind, but I

guess if I explain what we'll be doing they'll be accepting of it.' They didn't have to look far, for the women of the village had heard the alarm too, and had gathered behind the dwelling where Alan and Philippe were housed.

Acha spoke quietly, almost in a whisper to him.

'Oh, my God! Alan! Have more Normans come here, already?'

Alan saw Acha was very uneasy at the prospect of more rapacious Normans finding them. She gripped his arm tightly.

'What are we going to do?'

'We're not sure. All we know is that the alarm sounded. It could be anything from an animal to a Norman, or even a branch falling from a tree. I'm going to ask you to do something for me, though, and you might not like the idea, but we need to be sure what is out there. If there's any danger, we'll see to it.' he replied reassuringly.

'You only have to ask, you know that. What do you need us to do?'

'Philippe and I will go around to the rear of the trap and approach from behind. You and some of the other women will come from the opposite direction. If they're Normans and they've managed to avoid the trap or are trying to free one of their number, then you keep them occupied, and we'll dispatch them. There will not be more than four. That's how we were grouped, initially. Could you and the others girls do that?'

'Let me go and speak to some of the others. I'll not be long.' Acha ran off as quickly as she could to discuss the plan with the other women.

Philippe saw that Alan was concerned, and with a smile he patted him on the shoulder.

'Is your blade sharp Alan?'

'It's always sharp, you know that. I just don't like killing in cold blood. I don't have the temperament for it, unless I've no option. But I guess there's no alternative under these circumstances.'

Philippe looked over the hazel fence at the position of the trap, when he noticed Acha returning with the answer from the women.

'Well?'

'The women will do exactly as you wish. They're not afraid.'

Alan and Philippe made a circuitous route to the rear of the trap. They watched as the women cautiously approached from the front, each carrying a sharpened blade. The men sensed that the women wanted blood, Norman blood. The brothers looked on as the women came ever closer. Cautiously, they made their approach, their nerves stretched to fever pitch.

In the trap, Heribert was trying desperately to get a hand to his scramseax. He could just touch it with his fingers, but that was about all he could do.

'Bugger! Now what do we do? My scram is on the ground, and so, too, is my axe. Bugger'

'Let's try bouncing. The branch should give enough to allow you to reach your blade. Are you ready?' He saw Heribert nod. 'One, two, three go!'

'Not so fast, Norman arseholes!' Acha called. The women strode forward, showing themselves, surrounding their captives.

'Come for a little sport, have you?' Acha smashed her fist into the side of

Thridred's head with such a blow that he almost passed out.

'What the hell do you think you're doing, woman!' Heribert cried, with a sound of disbelief in his voice. 'We are Saxon, you stupid cow!'

'I think,' Alan said with a smile, as he walked toward the women, 'that you hit the other one, perhaps, a little too soon!'

'Who the hell are you?' Heribert asked, on hearing what he took for a Norman accent.

'I'll tell you that as soon as we get you out of this mess.' Alan replied with a broad grin.

'If I cut you down, you must promise not to start fighting. Is that understood?'

'I'm not promising anything, you Norman bastard!'

Then you shall stay as you are. Come, ladies; we have a meal ready; don't we?'

'Indeed, we do, Alan. These ungrateful swine can stay where they are a little longer, until they learn some manners. Oh yes--in case you're interested, Alan and Philippe are not Norman. These two men are French. What is more, they are really nice. I think that you will owe them an apology for your horrid remarks.' The women began to move off toward their homes, the relief evident by their chattering and laughter.

'Wait! Don't leave us. Look, we're here to meet King Harold, and we just got caught up in this trap. I'm sorry. I just felt so angry that we allowed ourselves to be caught this way. There will be no fighting, we promise. Please, do let us down. My head is beginning to ache.'

'You have a scramseax. This means you're a housecarl, yes?'

'Yes, we're housecarls. Once made, we keep our word.' Heribert said, apologetically. Alan nodded to the women and they began to pull down on the branch, allowing Philippe to release the two men. Alan tied off the branch and the men rolled to the ground, then he reset the trap.

Philippe saw that Thridred stood tall and looked powerful. He wondered if they were trained fighters. He leaned over to Alan who told him that the men were housecarls. He saw Thridred holding his head and he knew that the man was trying to give the impression that he was brushing his hair backward, when the reality was that his head was thumping, and didn't want anyone to think that he'd been affected by Acha's punch. Philippe understood that much. Heribert shook himself to allow his tunic to fall and hang normally.

'My scramseax and axe, if you don't mind?' he asked, trying not to sound too demanding. Heribert looked about, surveying the fifteen or so women gathered about them. He then looked directly into Alan's eyes. He could work out most situations, but this was beyond his ken.

'He's wondering what's going on here, Alan.' Philippe remarked, as he watched Alan stepping forward, holding out his hand, but the two men did nothing but stare back at him.

'You made a promise that you wouldn't fight with us. Will you keep your word?' asked Alan. Acha moved closer and stood beside Alan.

'They will Alan. They're housecarls, and as much as that, they're Saxon. I feel you'll have more in common with them than with the Normans.'

Once more Alan offered his hand to Heribert. Heribert took his hand in his and sheepishly nodded his head in thanks.

'I'm Heribert, and this is my brother, Thridred. There is one other of our company, a few hundred paces from here. He is cooking a meal. We came looking for some water, wine, or ale to take with our fare. I'll have to say we did not expect the welcome we've endured!'

Ricula stepped over to the tall Heribert. She looked him up and down and reached out to feel his strong arms.

'My husband is like you. He, too, has gone to fight with Harold. Now, you shall tell us why you're not with the king, and what brought you here.'

Acha decided it was time for her to take control. She placed her hand on Ricula's shoulder and turned toward the other women.

'We have reset the trap and shall now return to our meetinghouse. To understand our situation, these men need to know our story.'

Philippe handed the two housecarls their weapons, and half-stared at brothers wondering if they could be trusted. He motioned to the group to move on, while he stayed back a little in case these men should turn on him. He followed on, as the women started down the hill toward the dwellings, while Ricula, Ebba, and Acha held back and accompanied the four men.

'You've become queen here, Acha.' Alan remarked. 'You have skill motivating the other women, which I find is an admirable trait.'

'You have brought the tough interior out of me, something no man has been able to do. I always kept my innermost feelings to myself. You've shown me how to take control, Alan. I can now cope with situations that, not long ago, I couldn't have managed at all. You've taught me to think and make decisions. I'm grateful to you for teaching me these things.'

'We come from different backgrounds. Our lives back home are very different from the peaceful lives you lead here. We're constantly on guard from the Normans and their tax collectors and enforcement officers. These last months, Philippe and I have learned to live on our wits, and to survive under harsh conditions. One day, I will tell you about my life back in France and of the home we once had. I know my family is wondering about us, and must surely be in despair, for they've not heard from us in a long time.'

Thridred was listening to the conversation between Acha and Alan.

'Am I to infer that your brother is a dumb-mute, Alan?'

'Indeed, he's not. He has no grasp of the Saxon tongue, but he will, soon enough. We're going to teach Philippe to speak English.' Alan saw Philippe was walking slightly ahead, arm-in-arm with Ebba. They were giggling like teenagers.

'Look at those two, Acha. For the world, Ebba has fallen in love with him. Has she bewitched him with her womanly touch?'

'Perhaps.'

They soon reached the large house used for moots. Acha described to Alan the custom of special meetings.

'The name for a general meeting of the elders is called a moot.' she began,

'Once a month,' she continued, 'a moot is held to discuss matters arising in the village.'

As they all entered the moot house, Acha clapped her hands to bring the meeting to order, then began speaking.

'Before anyone speaks, and to allay any confusion, I feel that I should, for the benefit of Heribert and Thridred, tell the story of how Alan, and his brother, Philippe, came to us.'

Everyone gathered round, some sitting, others standing, as Acha related the story of the two Frenchmen who sat with them. Everyone listened in silence of the brave deeds by Alan and Philippe Domfront. Ebba passed around bowls of fermented grape juice that had the consistency of syrup, but tasted very good and welcomed by them all. Alan thought that it was not what you would call wine, but it sure is good, though.

'So you want to join the English fyrd, young man?' Heribert asked, turning to Alan, slurring his words, almost falling off his stool onto Alan's lap.

'It's not an easy life being a fyrdsman. You'll have to fight and get killed, you know. Oh yes, they get killed every time they go outside, normally by their wives, he, he, he.' Everyone laughed aloud, including Philippe, as Ebba continued to translate to him.

Philippe whispered to Ebba's, requesting her to ask Heribert a provocative question.

'Ebba, ask Heribert what he thinks of Harold. I really want to know what the housecarls and the ordinary people think of him.'

She interrupted Heribert's next sentence with Philippe's question.

Through Alan, Philippe listened as Heribert told him of his king being a fine upstanding leader, and a brave one too. He also told of how he'd fought with the king when he was Earl Harold, how Harold was always fair to his men, and how they always got paid on time. He related how Harold once had to rob a church to pay his housecarls, and of how Harold paid the church back, plus a little more. Heribert nodded drunkenly around the room with his self-important knowledge.

'He likes the ladies, by all accounts.' interrupted Thridred with a wide grin and a twinkle in his eye.

'Aye, he does, at that, but he always does right by them. I've never had a girl come knocking at my door with a child in her arms, asking where he might be found.' Heribert replied, as once more riotous laughter filled the room. Philippe laughed along, too. He felt quite at home amongst his new-found friends.

'I will learn to speak your tongue, Ebba.' he whispered, noticing her nodding appreciation of his intention, as he continued to listen to Heribert's words via this sweet young waif, of the beloved Harold, that fascinated him so much.

'As a fighter,' continued Heribert, 'he's fearless in battle. I stood by his side in Wales many years ago, when an opponent wielding a sword slashed him across the face. He never once batted an eyelid. He just took the sword off the man, and cut his head off for his trouble. He was much younger then, and perhaps a little arrogant, but you always knew where you stood with him.'

Thridred interrupted his brother with a remark that made them all cheer loudly.

'Harold would never ask a man to do anything he was not capable of doing himself. He has good judgement, too. He always weighs up a situation first

before he acts. He'll ask for your opinion, if he feels it might be of good use; indeed, he's a good and honest man.'

The door opened, and there in the doorway stood Hilda with Boisil by her side. He was looking a little embarrassed and carrying a cast iron pot, full of rabbit stew.

'Look, what I found in the woods.' said Hilda, smiling. 'I've got myself a fine-looking young man, and what's more, he's brought us dinner!'

'Boisil! My comrade in arms, my God, I'm sorry. We forgot all about you.' said Heribert rather sheepishly, as he staggered toward him, with his arms outstretched.

Boisil settled down amongst his companions, laughed at the story of his comrades' downfall and drank his fill. The only one still mindful of the next day, when they should meet with Harold's housecarls.

Here and there the odd groan permeated the air, mingled with the snuffling of pigs and the clucking of ducks. A cock crowed, its cock-a-doodle-doo stirring only the other cocks in the vicinity. The morning brought a warm breeze to the sleepy hamlet. The smoking remnants of the nights before fires emitting a poor facsimile of the puffing and sizzling flames that once were. The men stirred lazily from their night's sleep. Alan thought he might have managed another ale before being hoisted to the sleeping cot by Philippe. A dog barked at something, but lay back down to snooze, feeling a little of the men's ennui. One or two ladies emerged from the moot hall to yawn and stretch, to fetch wood and collect eggs.

An hour later the ladies stood around outside, laughing, chattering and occasionally giggling as they rekindled fires to prepare the men breakfast. After a while later, the aroma of cooking sausage, cabbage, parsnips, chicken and peas, prepared for the men's delight, wafted about the village.

Ebba had taken advantage of everyone else's preoccupation and had enjoyed a wondrous night of lovemaking with Philippe. Yet she feared this might be the last day she would ever see him. She kissed his still-sleeping head and whispered a little love poem in his ear. He awoke to her lips softly moulded to his. They continued to kiss, but time was pressing to dress, eat, and then be gone. She pressed in his hand a flower tied with a lock of her golden hair.

'Go eat, my sweet Philippe. Do what you must, then return to me. Do you promise me this?' She gazed longingly into his eyes, her loins still moist with longing for more, from a night of physical and cerebral love.

'Ebba. If I die in battle against evil men, you will know that I died doing what is right. If I am able to return, I will wed you in God's house. I'll give you children who will know of the deeds of good men and of the sacrifice many made to overcome evil.' Ebba then fell into uncontrollable sobs, and the tears ran in rivulets down her cheeks.

Philippe hardly knew how to console her. Only once had he been forced to cope with a woman in such grief. When Thora had died that fateful morning, Maria had been all but suicidal, and it'd taken all their family's efforts to comfort her. Thora, he thought, will she understand? She is my companion in heaven, and Ebba

my companion on earth. He held Ebba closely and kissed the top of her head, stroking her hair while speaking softly to her. Once more he thought of his beloved Thora. He wondered if Thora would allow him happiness, here, on earth. Thora, Will you forgive my sin with Ebba, my darling?

Slowly, Ebba recovered her composure and gazed into Philippe's moistening eyes. She picked stray bits of straw from his clothing, dreading the final words of goodbye.

'I can't bear to see you leave, my darling. Just go, and come back safe to me.' She turned to face the wall. This was the moment that she had dreaded. 'Go, please, go,' she pleaded through her sobbing.

Philippe left the room and didn't look back; he couldn't. He felt guilt running through every pore in his body. He felt that he'd betrayed Thora. Pulling the door gently closed behind him, he strode out to meet the others. He looked across to see Alan and the other men making ready the fresh horses. They were real horses, not ponies as the Saxons customarily used. The Normans did have a use after all, he thought, and bid the men good morning in broken English.

'Ah, Philippe, I trust you slept well?' enquired Alan with a sly grin.

'He slept better than any of us, he slept with a beautiful woman, and one that loves him. Now, that is a good, sleep.' said Boisil, with a chuckle. 'Oh, yes, we buried the three turds this morning; not that you'd have noticed, Philippe.' Boisil turned to see the women flocking around them. They all were in tears as they bid the two men, whom they'd come to trust and had taken to their hearts, farewell.

Ebba stayed indoors and listened to the chatter coming from outside. Her head fell into her hands as the tears fell through her fingers and onto the dry, earthen floor.

Acha stepped forward.

'I speak for everyone here. We wish you well in the battle to come. You have our respect as men, and for what you all are bravely about to face. We will be here for you should any of you wish to return. You will be made most welcome. And for one of you here, there is a woman waiting to be a good, faithful wife. Go, and return victoriously, and above all, be safe.' She turned and walked briskly away. She did not look back, but entered her dwelling and shut the door behind her. She lay on the bed sobbing, for she knew that the man she had fallen in love with had a wife in France, and a child. He was forbidden fruit.

Heribert turned to Alan, looking at the man with a rare admiration.

'Are you sure you wish to accompany us to join Harold's forces, Alan? You could have a good life here, both of you. The women here need a couple of good strong men to look after their interests.'

'We've chosen the path of righteousness, Heribert. We now have a mission to accomplish. We shall then see what the Lord brings us. We promise to return, or die in the attempt. If not, we'll die knowing that we did our best to defy and defeat evil to the end. Philippe and I are strong and fit. We can look after ourselves. We'll be proud to serve Harold— if he'll have us with him, that is.'

'I can see you're both good men. You've shown this to be so by your deeds and

your treatment of our women. We would be proud to have you both join us in the shield wall. In return, all we can promise you are tears, blood, sweat, and friendship." Heribert reached over, clapping Alan heartily on the back. 'Come along; we must be going.'

The five men rode off into the hills to see what fate would serve them in the coming days.

At Waltham, Harold inspected his housecarls. A band of men so tough not even the devil could make them flinch, he mused. He felt proud and confident as he thought of his father and all that he had achieved in his lifetime. We all miss you, Father, you will be proud of us, live or die. He crossed himself and looked about for Brithnoth and saw him striding toward him.

His forces had camped for the night while messengers gave news of the enemies static position just above Hastings. The fearless Godwinson brothers sat in a circle, the light of the camp fire illuminating their faces in ghostly fashion.

'This is the position, Brithnoth.' Harold said confidently. 'William's forces have moved some half a day's walk inland, looking for a spot that suits them. That is here.' With a stick, Harold drew a map in the dirt approximating the rivers Maltose and Astern Brook. 'I know this region well, so if our scouts are correct, then we have an advantage.' Harold moulded some mud pies into small hills to represent the lay of the land, as he knew it to be. 'On this ridge here, we'll assemble first thing in the morning. It's known locally as the *hoary apples* or *crab trees* to some of you. The Normans won't see our approach because the valley where they're encamped is just here. To the north is a basin that's marshland. That's about two thousand paces from our destination. It's tree-lined, so their view of our approach will be obscured.' Harold looked around, waiting for comments or questions.

'How far away are we from their position?' Brithnoth asked.

'Just two hours march. We dare not go any closer, or we'll give away our position and strength. They'll know about us soon enough. We'll come through the trees to this position here.' The king said pointing on the dirt map to Caldbec Hill with his stick.

'What about the reinforcements, Harold? Shouldn't we wait for them?' asked Wulfnoth. 'After all, an extra day or two will help our forces' numbers to be complete.'

'The reinforcements will be here about mid-afternoon. By that time, we can be sure of a victory, or at the least a good sign that we are on our way to one. We should by then have another three thousand men at hand.' Harold noticed Gyrth shaking his head negatively, looking uneasy at the prospect of fighting with a depleted force.

'That is not going to happen, Harold, and you know it! We need another day to assemble such a force. We must disentangle the rational from the irrational. We've won a great victory over Harald Sigurdsson, so don't let it go to your head.' Gyrth, his imploring eyes burning his thoughts telepathically toward his brother.

'You're right, of course, Gyrth. We must look both strategically and

tactically at the situation. I'm only sorry I disbanded the navy at Pevensey and sent them to Chatham. This was a foolish error, since we have such a large coastline to cover. What is done is done, so we have to make the best of a bad my judgement. However, William is at Hastings and hasn't moved very far inland. It seems as though he has settled on his position and is unlikely to move inland further than he has, at least for a while. He needs to consolidate his gains and secure his lines of supply. This means that our fleet at Chatham can come around and strike at the Norman rear, so that their supply line can be broken, but only if the wind is in our favour. As for Pevensey, well, they have a little over a thousand men garrisoned in the old Roman fort. I've dispatched the local fyrd to keep the Normans that are there occupied. I've made sixteen hundred men available for the job, and that will protect our flank. We have eight thousand five hundred in the main force. That should be sufficient for a total victory. Of that I'm confident.'

'Well, it's a start, but what of tomorrow?' Leofwine Inquired. Gyrth raised his hand and once more cut in with a suggestion.

'Harold, Swein and myself should take in the main force. You bring the backup forces if we should get into trouble. That way, at least we have a good chance of depleting the bastard's forces to a point where the losses will mean almost certain disaster for him.'

Harold stared sternly at his brother.

'You'll do as I say, Gyrth. We'll have enough strength to take out William and whatever he has brought against us. In any case, I will need you and Swein to command the flanks. William has a cavalry force that your men are quite able to confront. I need your expertise. I've been teaching my housecarls a new tactic to deal with cavalry. With one swing they'll take off the front leg of a horse, and on the return swing take out the rider as he falls. That way they conserve overall strength and can do more damage quickly. Is everything I've said understood?' He looked about, and they all nodded. 'We gather at first light and take the route I've described. Now, go and see that the men are ready. Gentlemen, goodnight.' Harold got to his feet and briskly retired to his tent, leaving his brothers and the other officers to talk amongst themselves.

Harold stood at the entrance to his tent for a moment, in the light of a torch. He looked up to gaze at the heavens. 'Father, is this the end for the Godwinsons? Have I miscalculated and moved too soon? Tomorrow.' he mumbled, 'I shall kick some Norman arses so hard, they'll wish they'd never been born.' He smiled confidently, safe in the knowledge he had the resources and the courage of good men about him.

Falling into a deep sleep, he dreamed of Edith Swanneck and the last night they'd spent together. He envisioned their rolling in the grass, the spring flowers smelling sweetly as their bodies crushed the petals beneath them, releasing their sweet scent. They kissed and made love until the light faded.

'Harold, Harold!' Swein shook his snoring brother from his slumber.

He awoke with a start, wondering who, what, where, until he realized Swein was above him looking down, fully armoured and ready for battle. He idly noticed how candlelight flickered over Swein's fine smooth features.

'It will be light very soon, Harold. You ought to get ready for the men. The boys are preparing breakfast, and I think that we should go and eat.'

'You know, Swein, I was dreaming that I was back home with Edith and the children. I knew it was all a dream. Sadly, reality is always something other than we wish it to be.' Harold washed his face in the warm water that Cedric brought in.

'Would you like me to shave you, Father?' asked the boy casually.

Harold reached for the boy's hand.

'Cedric, my son, you're a fine young man. Please kneel before me. Harold turned toward his brother. 'Swein, this young man is my natural son. I recognize him as such, and make him Earl of York.' Harold took his sword and tapped Cedric on both shoulders. 'Arise, Earl Cedric.' The king then kissed the boy on his forehead. Cedric stood looking bemused. He bowed to his father, and withdrew, walking backwards from the tent. Not realising there was a tent rope at his heels he fell back. His face turned a bright pink with embarrassment as those around all laughed heartily. Meanwhile, Harold related to Swein the story of the affair with the boy's mother as a youth and of Cedric's birth. 'He's a good boy, Swein. If I don't survive the battle, see he is looked after with Edith, she knows the truth.'

'Yes, of course, Harold. By the moon, you're a dark stallion. He's your son, and all these years you have kept this a secret from everyone. I'm an uncle again, I see.'

'It is no secret, Swein. It's just that I've never mentioned it to anyone other than Edith and our sister.'

'Well, come along, Harold; let's eat, and I'm starved.' Swein smiled at his younger brother and winked. 'It's good to have family, brother.'

'Dawn's light was just bright enough to make out men, without benefit of torches. The men were seated, quietly eating their fill before making ready for the two hours march that would take them to the battlefield.

Brithnoth awoke feeling refreshed. He ate, and relaxed back into his hammock, when he noticed Swein emerging from Harold's tent, calling to him.

Ah, Swein, I think I could do with a pull.'

Good morning, Brithnoth. What do you mean by a pull?'

It's my finger- it's gone funny. Give it a yank for me, will you? There's a good fellow.' said holding out his hand, with the offending finger outstretched. Swein took hold of the finger and pulled gently. Suddenly he heard the loudest fart he'd heard in months emanating from Brithnoth's rotting innards.

'You fucking arse- licking toad! I'll cut your fucking throat if you do that again.' He grabbed at the old warrior and was thrown head over heels by Brithnoth's mighty arm.

'Steady on, Brithnoth. I'm only a baby. I'll have Harold hang you by your balls, if you have any, and if he can find a noose big enough, that is.' Brithnoth held out a hand and pulled Swein up from the ground.

'We ought to call for a general muster, Swein. It's getting late, and the day will be lost if we don't move shortly.'

'Yes, I know, and I need to speak with you on a matter of some urgency.' Swein was looking troubled and he knew Brithnoth could see his apprehension. He stood staring at the ground. 'It's Harold. He's lost his senses.'

'What brings you to that conclusion?' Brithnoth asked, looking puzzled.

'You're going to think I'm mad too, but hear me out, will you?'

'Go on, lad.' said Brithnoth, as he pulled on his boots.

'Harold told me of a visitation he had with a wizard from the future.' He noticed Brithnoth smile. 'This isn't funny, Brithnoth. I'm serious! He told me that this wizard showed him marvellous things, and that with his help he could defeat the duke's forces at a stroke. He's going mad, just like that mad idiot Mick-MacMad, the Scottish loon who told him he could turn horse-dung into gold. It was a trick, of course. Harold was impressed with his conjuring, but he saw through the fool. This is different. He actually believes this wizard can accomplish what he says.'

'Swein, you really do talk some shit at times, you really do.' Brithnoth shook his head dismissively from side to side, chuckling softly. 'There's one thing that Harold isn't, and that is mad, got that?'

'He told me that the wizard showed him sticks that made fire, and the wizard killed a deer for him from a great distance.' replied Swein imploringly.

'He told you all this from his own lips, did he?' asked Brithnoth, wondering if it was Swein who was the mad one in the Godwinson family.

'Yes, it was the other night, just after the fiasco with the monk in London.'

'He was relating a dream he had had. I've no doubt about that Swein.'

He noticed from over Swein's shoulder, a small group of his officers approaching them.

'Officers, muster your men. Be quick about it. Time is short!' Brithnoth snapped, as the men turned back to do his bidding. He returned his gaze once more to Swein.

'Harold is nothing more than overworked just now, so pay no attention to his dream telling, wizards from the future, indeed.' Brithnoth turned to stride away, when he halted abruptly and looked back at Swein. 'Our housecarls are professional soldiers. We've no need of wizards.' Brithnoth sported a broad smile, then strode off to join his men. Swein shrugged and followed on, taking charge of the men placed under his care with a strict discipline. The men moved off in orderly fashion. Through the woods the army made their way, until at last they came to a clearing, with a long ridge about a mile and a half in length that fell away steeply toward the marshland below. Half a mile to the south, the land rose once more in a gentle slope, where Harold could see William's forces advancing to the top of the opposite hill.

Boisil sat with his brothers-in-arms; Herbert, Thridred, Alan, and Philippe.

'Philippe trained you well, Alan, I can see that.' said Boisil. 'I sense little concern in you or your brother. Alan is a good man, and hard as rock; he'd make a fine housecarl. I can say that I'm proud to have you here with us. We've a chant that we use to strengthen our natural courage when we need to prepare ourselves for the final moments. It brings all the housecarls into tune.'

It makes us fight as one body, and what's more, it puts the shits up the enemy.' Alan laughed as he relayed to Philippe what Boisil had told him.

'I now understand most of what the people say to me, Alan. I learn quickly, you know that. I need a little practice speaking though.' he replied, smiling. 'You know, I feel like I belong here. No, really, I do. These men have something about them that I never detected in the Norman camp. There is sense of oneness. I can feel it all around. We are accepted as if we are Saxon. Even that old chap, Brithnoth, made us feel at home. God alone knows what the others had told him about us. He gripped my arm so tightly it almost went numb! For an old man he sure knows how to show his strength- I was impressed.' Philippe gazed about, looking here and there at his companions and at the other housecarls as they prepared themselves for the coming conflict.

'Well, let's just enjoy the moment, Philippe.' Alan said, noticing the king mounted on a horse, with his brothers standing beside him, and pointed toward Harold. 'Hey look. There is Harold Godwinson, their king? he looks a strong fellow.'

'Which one is he?' Philippe was straining to see as the housecarls moved back-and-forth, occasionally obscuring his view of the Godwinsons.

'He's the one standing up in the stirrups.'

'Oh, yes. I see him now. I guess that he's surveying the scene to see how he will conduct the battle.' Philippe got to his feet. 'You've come a long way since we left home, Alan. You're much more confident in yourself, and I'm proud of you.' Philippe felt his brother's hand on his arm.

Swein strolled amongst the housecarls while sporting a broad grin as he nodded to the men, followed by pageboys carrying large and cumbersome objects wrapped in cloth. He stopped and spoke to one of the housecarls, who pointed a finger in the direction of the two Frenchmen. Swein then ambled over to sit amongst the five men.

'So, you two are our intrepid heroes.' said Swein, grinning broadly. Alan was not sure just who it was that had sat down with them, and nudged Thridred, looking for an answer. Thridred sported a half smile and turned to look elsewhere.

'I'm Swein Godwinson, the brother of Harold, our king. He knows about you two young men, and he's highly impressed with what he's heard. I've come to welcome you, and see that your needs are met. I'm sorry that you have to be here on such a day as this, but we couldn't postpone the battle, as the other side has made a special journey to get their arses kicked.' Everyone laughed at Swein's incredible humour. 'The king has asked me to present to you a token of his respect. For both of you, I have a shield, a mail shirt, and a helmet too.' He hesitated for a moment. 'Oh yes, there is something more.' Swein summoned a page carrying a covered bundle. The boy handed over the swaddled package to Swein. Swein uncovered two fine swords in scabbards. 'They're of the finest steel and are well-balanced. Take these into battle. They're yours to keep, as a *Thank You* for your brave and honourable deeds.'

Alan and Philippe sat with their mouths wide open, speechless. Philippe finally composed himself and stood, motioning with his arm to Alan to rise, as

well. Alan quickly surged to his feet, causing all the others to follow suit.

'I- well, that is, we, my brother and I, feel privileged to be amongst such men as yourselves. We thank you for your king's gifts and we will see that he will be more than repaid for his generosity this day. We know what is to come. We also know who has the right, and who is fighting for a just cause. We know, too, that we might not come out of this alive. Together we will fight as brothers.' Philippe looked about the smiling group of men. 'We will happily fight alongside our new-found family, as I know they would fight for us.' he said, in improving yet still little-practised English.

'I am happy to be here too.' said Alan, who had a tear welling from the corner of each eye.

'And we're happy to have you amongst us too Philippe.' replied Boisil grinning, throwing his long arms around him, almost squeezing the air out of Philippe's body.

'Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be seeing to my orders.' Swein clasped the arm of the five men in turn, pivoted on his heel, and walked towards another group of men.

Alan glanced at Thridred and Boisil with embarrassment. He wanted to ask what he should do with it.

'I've never held a real warrior's sword before.'

'Well,' Boisil said, 'you now have a chance to learn what to do with it. Err- if you don't need it Alan, I know of a good home for it. Look, you've cut the heads off chickens. Just do the same with Normans.' he said grinning, 'The same as you would with chickens, simple, right?'

Alan turned his gaze toward Thridred. 'I want to know Thridred, what is it that you told those people to get us all this equipment? There is more to this than meets the eye.' Alan stood with hands on his hips, looking serious.

'Nothing other than what the womenfolk told us, honest.' replied Thridred.

'And some,' retorted Alan. 'In any case, I need to eat. Are you coming, Philippe?'

'I'm rumbling a little.' he replied, and ambled along to where oxen roasted over coals. He stood in line with hundreds of other men, waiting to be served with slices of meat.

'You know, it never ceases to amaze me how orderly the Saxons are. There's no pushing, shoving, or the like. When we were in Duke William's camp the men were like pigs in a trough. The mere sight of some of the- lets call them animals, disgusted me.' commented Philippe, practising his English on his brother.

'Fucking Normans! We've got a fucking Norman in our camp!' A fyrdsman yelled, as he rushed forward from another line, carrying a seax. He lunged at Philippe, his polished blade glinting in the morning sun. Philippe spun round, but was held from behind by another fyrdsman. In a flash, three men rushed toward the line, blades in hand, ready to kill. In a thrice, two fyrdsmen lay on the ground held by the weight of Boisil and Thridred, while Heribert extricated a hold that another fyrdsman had upon Alan.

'If there is one man here that wishes to kill my friends, then they'll have to kill me, first.' Heribert stared at the amassed lines of fyrdsmen. 'There's

no one here that can measure up to these two men who've come to join and fight with us. All of you shall show my friends respect, as I do. Let those who disagree step forward, stand in front of me, and I will teach them a lesson in manners.' Heribert's huge frame, taller than anyone, gazed about the company. 'Then, gentleman, you may resume your positions in the lines. Philippe, Alan, come with me. I want you to meet someone.' The fyrdsmen were released and were then pushed roughly back into the queue.

'My gracious lord' Heribert said, bowing. I wish to apologise for the disturbance you have witnessed. If your highness will allow me, I wish to present to you my esteemed companions, Alan and Philippe Domfront, whom you have so graciously honoured in your absence.'

Harold stood surrounded by his brothers. In his hand, he held his helm, which carried a small gold circlet round the helm's base. Harold passed it to Cedric and took a step forward.

'Heribert, my friend, it is so good to see you again. It's been a long time.'

'It has indeed, my lord. You're looking well and confident this morning, Sire.' Herbert said.

'So, these two young men are our heroes from the village.' Harold gazed at Philippe who'd bowed his head. 'Philippe and Alan. You are most welcome into my kingdom. I was extremely impressed by the story that Heribert has told my brother, Swein. I trust that your rewards were a suitable addition to your equipment?' Harold noticed that Philippe had already attached his scabbard and sword to his belt, then noticed Alan had done likewise.

'My lord, I thank you for your generosity, but we feel that our honour is ill deserved, for what we have done is nothing more than any one of your subjects would have done under similar circumstances.' replied Alan bowing very low to his new kingly master.

A cloud moved away allowing the sun's rays to shine directly into Harold's eyes. The king squinted and he held up his arm. Alan, instinctively, raised his shield to shade the king. THUD! A crossbow bolt hit Alan's shield lodging itself halfway through the shield and in a direct line with Harold's head. Harold dropped to the ground followed by his brothers with shields raised. Alan was pushed to the ground by Philippe and fell directly on top of Harold's brother's shields.

'Assassin! It must be Eumer.' cried Alan,

A few moments later, Swein raised his head and noticed a housecarl striding toward them carrying a man's head and a crossbow under his arm. Swein stared at Alan.

'I killed Eumer myself, Alan. Tell me, what did you know of this man?' Swein listened to the story of how Alan and Philippe looked for work with the Normans, and when they first saw Eumer practising with a special crossbow. Harold got to his feet and listened to Alan's story. 'I'm glad to have you amongst us.' said Harold, when Alan had finished with his tale.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Harold sat alone, surveying the land. He felt the warmth of the early morning sun on his face and hands, musing. If the men are to fight with full armour in this heat, then it has to be now. He sensed a rider coming from behind. He turned to see him riding a fine steed, one of the six that William had sent as his bribe to Edward a year ago. I have to admit, he thought, that these are indeed a fine breed of horse, but if that bastard thinks that I'm worth only the price of a good stallion, he can think again. He turned back, as Gyrth dismounted to tether his mount.

'You've chosen well, Harold. We've a good vantage point. The bastard will be hard-pushed to gain this ground from us. His forces will soon be worn, running up and down that slope and be easily picked off from our position.' Gyrth sat beside him and picked his nose, wiping his fingers on his leggings.

'To be frank Gyrth, this is the only place where we could have any advantage. The other alternatives are, unfortunately, to the benefit of William's forces. Our best opportunity will be to gain Caldbec Hill. If he's to engage us in a pitched battle, he must follow us. Take a look down there. They'll have to cross that stream to their left. that will cause them some problems if they're to come at us from that direction, and the ground's very marshy, too.' Harold pointed towards Astern Brook, which flowed below them to their right. Gyrth nodded.

'We really ought to have brought more archers with us. That would have given us an added advantage if we could have had them in the woods to our left, during an advance.' He gazed out over the camp fires, smelling the wood-smoke.

'The archers are on their way, Gyrth. They're coming from Shrewsbury, nearly two thousand of them. They were dispatched a week ago, and we should have met up with them at Tunbridge Wells. They're a little late, but will be here as soon as possible. If they're too late, we'll just have to muddle through as best we can without them. In any case, we had Svein Estrithson's force join us last night; that's another five hundred men.'

'Look, there's someone coming our way.' Gyrth pointed to the right, where a rider, carrying a pennant could just be made out making his way through the clearing mist that was in the depression. 'They know we've arrived, obviously.'

'Send someone to bring him to me, will you, Gyrth? This could be interesting.'

Gyrth mounted his horse to trot back to his original position amongst the men and called to a page to bring the rider to him. A moment later, Harold followed in Gyrth's tracks. Under guard, the rider approached Harold, dismounted, and bowed low.

Harold recalled the last messenger back in London, and his rude manner. He hoped this man would show more respect for his office than the last emissary he'd encountered. He looked at the man, who was unarmed and wearing a green tunic with ochre-coloured hose. Harold approached the man and offered his hand to the envoy, when a smile of recognition came over his face as the messenger clasped his arm and grinned.

'Eric! It's good to see you looking fit and well.' Harold said, beaming his

broadest smile. He recalled that Eric had accompanied him and Guy of Ponthieu to Eu to meet Duke William after Harold's capture and incarceration. He knew him to be a good servant, and trustworthy. But this meeting was different. This was more serious. Harold detected a great sadness in Eric's eyes and he knew this was a job that on this occasion Eric detested.

'You look healthy, too, my lord. It's good to see you again, but this is a sombre day, one I wished had never arrived. My sadness is for today's coming events, for my master is determined. My lord, William, Duke of Normandy, sends you greetings. I have to say that Harold it's part of the protocol, but you know it's not true.' the herald said, abashed, his voice full of shame for the message he had to bring.

Harold gazed into Eric's face, and he felt a brotherly empathy toward him.

'Your message, Eric?' Harold inquired. His kindness towards Eric was obvious, yet his ambivalence for the herald's verbal message overt.

Eric took from his bag a roll of parchment that was written in English. He proffered the parchment to Harold.

'I'm to give you this message, Sire, and to wait for your reply.' Harold unrolled the parchment and began to read the contents.

'It is not with temerity or greed I come here, nor is my claim unjust. It is after deliberation, and in defence of right, that I have crossed the sea into this country. My lord and kinsman, King Edward, appointed me Heir of this kingdom. Even you, Harold, have been the witness to this. He did so because, amongst all his acquaintances, he held me to be the best capable of supporting him during his lifetime and of ruling the kingdom justly after his death. Moreover, his choice was not made without the consent of his magnates since Archbishop Stigand, Earl Godwin, Earl Leofric, and Earl Siward confirmed it, swearing at his hands that after King Edward's death, they would serve ME as their lord. Will you submit your army to such bloodshed? It could be decided that you and I fight, and I risk my life in single combat with you to decide whether the Kingdom of England should by right be yours or mine.'

Harold asked Cedric to see that Eric be comfortably entertained, and then motioned his brothers to follow him into his tent. He passed the parchment to Swein. Each perused the message at some length, then passed it on to the next brother in turn.

'The bastard has some impertinence Harold. This maniac really thinks he can just walk in and take whatever he likes. The man's an absolute arsehole!' Wulfnoth said, indignantly. Harold's eyes narrowed, as a frown began to contort his face.

'Wulfnoth! This is serious! Can you not see what is over on the other hillside? When that force moves, we'll have trouble on our hands.' He picked a pennant, exited from the tent, strode determinedly toward the herald, Eric.

'We are in no mood for banter, Eric. Tell your master that he should leave now while he still has his life and the command of his forces. Otherwise tell him to prepare for bloodshed.' He gripped Eric's arm tightly and moved close to

the envoy's ear. 'Go, my friend, deliver your reply, then leave the field and be safe. When the day is won to us, hold this aloft and you'll not be harmed.' He passed to him a gonfanon and Eric placed it inside his tunic.

The herald bowed and thanked Harold for his safe conduct. He mounted his steed and turned back to ride toward Duke William's camp.

As the herald topped the opposite high ground, three riders approached and led him to where William was impatiently awaiting Harold's reply.

'Well, herald. What have you to tell me?' William was looking past the herald's shoulder, toward Harold's position. It was almost as if Eric's words were of no consequence to him. He turned his gaze to the young man. 'Well, speak and then!' Eric cleared his throat.

'There is to be bloodshed, my lord.'

William turned to gaze at Walter Giffard, before returning his gaze once more to the opposing Saxon forces just one thousand paces from their position.

'I expected nothing else from Godwinson.' He felt the butterflies in his stomach, something he'd never experienced before. 'So we have our answer. You have your orders Walter. Go and prepare to take England. When we're victorious, expect riches beyond your dreams.' The words came out as an uncontrollable stutter that made him feel embarrassed. He feigned a shiver as if cold and began clumsily brandishing his sword, practising in a mock fight, doing anything to hide his nervousness. The herald looked on in astonished bemusement at his master's awkward use of the weapon. His movements now controlled, William paused to gaze at the young man.

'Now, tell me everything you observed while you were in the Godwinson camp.' William struck a more casual pose, as though unconquered, but was.

'Sire, they number far more than we, but they've no cavalry. They're all footmen. About one third are housecarls, the rest being fyrdsmen. I also noticed very few archers amongst their number. They have with them the select fyrd. There may be as many as ten thousand, possibly more, and so very fierce-looking.' he recounted, hoping his lie might persuade another course of action.

Motioning Odo and Giffard to one side, William placed his hands on hips. He looked toward the ground, almost with a stoop.

'Giffard, do these figures tally with our own scout's record of counting?' Giffard stared at his master and then slowly shook his head.

'Not really, William; we made the count near eight thousand, but that depends on who you ask, of course.' Giffard turned to gaze across the valley at the opposing forces. 'Our vantage point is lower than the enemy's position. It's not easy to tell from here.'

'I might have known I'd asked the wrong man. Can anyone here count?' William asked irritably. He looked about for a sign of certainty of figures, but nothing was forthcoming.

For a moment, Odo remained silent. The tension is showing on him, and he's becoming unpredictable again, he thought, wondering if he ought to make himself scarce. William might make a gross miscalculation under such circumstances, then surely we would all be doomed. William needed a calming influence, but Odo

wasn't sure how best to approach him. He cleared his throat.

'It doesn't matter how many there are, William. We're either going to fight them, however many or we can go home right now. I don't think the numbers matter either way. We're not going home so we fight what we have in front of us, it's as simple as that.'

'The last time you spoke any sense, Odo, you were drunk. So either you've been drinking again or I have! The only question I ask of you is this. Do we attack them, or wait for them to come to us?' He looked over as Hugh stepped forward, seeking his attention.

'Yes, Hugh. What are your thoughts. Let me hear them.'

'For what it's worth, if we wait for them, they may decide on a night attack. They'll have that advantage, and what's more, we would be in danger of our men slinking off. If we were to give battle now Godwinson will be forced to move at our pace and we dictate the flow of the battle.'" William nodded his agreement, as did the others present.

'Then that's our course of action. Right, then let's prepare.' William gazed around at the men who'd pledged him their allegiance. The mood of the iron duke changed. He knew he had to do something and he was not going to lose face, despite the inward conflict, he had to suppress his deep held fear of losing. The psychopath within him suddenly gripped his sensibilities. His eyes became like that of an animal, unfeeling, distant and cruel. He was focused on one thing, victory and at any cost. He would defeat Harold or die in the attempt. The sea was behind him, and he had no escape.

Odo thoughtfully rubbed his chin, wondering. Cunning isn't going to do him any favours today, and he knows it. We're on foreign soil, prepared yes, but I'm acutely aware none of us might survive this battle, he mused, then he strode off to prepare to fight, swinging his mace, wondering if the boy go him a ship.

Waving away his servants, William now stood alone pondering his attributes, counting the positives while attempting to shrug off his disadvantages. Could I really have faced Harold in a one-to-one encounter? What if he'd accepted my offer of a winner-takes-all fight to the death to spare his men? I thank the Lady Mary he's refused and accepted to do battle. No, I've to show my men that I'm a leader, afraid of nothing. I'll turn this refusal to my advantage. I'll speak to my men and show them how the cowardly Harold ducked out of fighting me alone, and how he was too frightened to risk his life against my own. It will be easy to demonstrate to them that, unlike Harold, I was prepared to fight, myself, to spare the troops. Yes, that would perk their spirits no end. It would give them heart to fight, no matter the odds. All I have to do is to give the orders and stay just out of spear range. When the time is right, I'll ride into the thick of it, and England will be mine. He strolled back to his tent to ready himself for the coming fight. He sat calmly, silently, and alone, his chin resting in his hands, composing himself.

Outside William's tent, there was some commotion. He heard men shouting and calling. It annoyed him to be disturbed at such a time, then the duke's tent flaps opened and William Fitzosbern stepped forward, accompanied by two men,

dragging a man between them. Blood was streaming from the prisoner's nose, his hands tied with cord.

'My lord, I beg your pardon for this intrusion.'

'Ah, Fitzosbern, what is it, man? Who is this lamentable toad, which you've before me?'

'This man was brought to me accused of raping a servant, a boy of your household Sire.' As he spoke, Fitzosbern had the man thrown to the floor. William looked at the accused man. The man looked rough and unwashed. He had a long jagged scar across his blooded, scarcely recognizable face that seemed to permanently sport a sneer.

'And you're called?'

'They call me Snap, My Lord. I'm a sergeant.' he mumbled through swollen lips. William recognized the name, but dismissed searching for the memory of a past encounter.

'Do you admit your crime Snap?'

'I was caught with the boy, so I guess I have to say, yes, I fucked the boy, Sire.'

William began to boil. He tolerated homosexuals, but children were sacred to his senses.

'Bring the boy to me, and bring him now!' the enraged duke bellowed.

One of the guards left to fetch the boy who was just nine years of age. On his return the guard had the weeping boy in his arms. From the torn leggings, William could see blood was running from the boy's buttocks, and the boy was clearly in great distress.

The duke gazed in shameful disbelief at the boy. It was Rolf, a boy who had been with him just a few months. He was William's property, livestock, yes, but his, nonetheless. William nodded toward the two guards. They pushed Snap flat onto the ground.

The guards knew the punishment for this crime and roped Snap's legs and feet together. As one of the guards grasped Snap's tunic to rip it from his torso, the duke barked out the order.

'NO! Strip off his leggings.'

The guard looked up, startled at such a strange order, but did as he was bid. He took a sharp knife and sliced through the linen bands, stripping down Snap's leggings to expose his buttocks.

William walked briskly outside the tent, heading toward the brazier nearby, took up a spear held by a bodyguard and placed the iron tip into the fire.

'Bring him here! I see you like boys. I've no doubt you like the feeling of large warm things up your arse too, um? My boys are here to serve me, not the rank and file common soldiery. I really think this boy deserves redress, don't you agree, Sergeant Snap?' William turned to look at Fitzosbern. 'Can the boy stand Robert?'

'I doubt it, Sire The boy looks very hurt.'

'Then I'll gladly take the place of this young lad.' He took the now red-hot spear tip from the brazier, its wooden shaft blackened by the heat. Striding swiftly toward the snivelling and repugnant Snap, the duke rammed the spear into

the anus of the roped sergeant. Snap screamed, his agony echoing across the valley as the guards held the struggling sergeant still. 'You appreciate the warmth of a good shaft do you, Snap? I hope I satisfied you as you attempted to do with the boy.' William said, grimacing.

The smell was beginning to make those nearby retch, when at last William let go of the spear as the man collapsed onto his side in a heap, dead.

'Get that turd out of here and hang him, shaft and all! Let this be a lesson to those who defile my servants. Fitzosbern, see that the boy, Rolf, is taken care of.' The group dispersed and once more William was alone with his anger and thoughts.

'Ooh, I bet that hurt.' someone said, as he strode briskly away.

Giffard approached Odo. In his hand he held a list containing the names of men who'd not returned from the expedition to bring women from the surrounding area back to camp.

'What is it, Giffard?' Odo asked, impatiently, staring at man who stood looking sheepish. 'Come on, man, I've not got all day!' Giffard thrust the list into Odo's hands and muttered.

'Twenty three men are missing, and all but two are your men.'

'You'd better not be joking, Giffard.' Odo said as he read the list. 'How many women have we set to work?'

'Sixty-three.' Giffard answered, averting his gaze, avoiding Odo's stare. 'Yes, I know it's not good, and I can't think what could possibly have happened to these men.'

'Have you told William of these figures?' Odo folded his arms.

'No, not yet. I thought you'd better know first, as they were your men I took with me.'

'Twenty-three men, and you lose twenty-three valuable horse!? Do you know how much these horses are worth in terms of battle readiness, Giffard? You're not to utter so much as one word of this to William. Do I make myself plainly clear? Shit! He's bound to see we're depleted. You lose twenty-three horses, and think they won't be noticed? A blind man on a galloping newt would see that they're missing! Just at this moment, my brother might have too much on his mind to notice. If he asks, you tell him the men have gone out on another expedition. By that time we will have been readied for battle. With luck, he'll be preoccupied with other matters more pressing. What do you feel has happened to these horses?'

Giffard shrugged, as if he cared.

'There can only be two possibilities. Either the men were captured or killed, have defected to the English. If I'd to take a guess, it's the latter. We've had many scouts in the area since the day we arrived and we've not lost one of them. The Saxons would have been detected in that case. We've lost roughly four a day since we were sent on the mission to gather women. That would mean there are a few very strong and very brave men hiding out there somewhere, conducting a war of attrition. No, it's not the Saxon way—well, not generally. There's more to this than meets the eye.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

Philippe sat passively looking at the Saxon troops milling around the camp. He could hear their captains calling them to muster and noticed how they were organizing themselves into battalions. He was impressed, very impressed. He felt a hand upon his shoulder and heard a whisper. He looked up to see Thridred holding out a wedge of cheese. The offer welcomed with a returned smile.

'Your English is coming along very well, Philippe. You learn quickly. I'd like you to try and tell me about the duke. Take your time, there's no rush. What's the bastard like, as a man, I mean? You've seen him, spoken with him. Is he anything like they say?' Thridred was eager to know all about his enemy.

'I'll do my best Thridred. If I stumble, you will help me, yes.'

Thridred nodded, not minding at all Philippe's broken and sometimes comical English.

'He's not the sort of man you'd like to have an argument with, if that's what you mean.' Philippe went on to describe William's personal attributes. 'He's a hot-tempered fellow, not to be messed with. I've only met a couple of men who are as cruel and nasty as he. One of those was Sergeant Snap. Do you remember Alan telling you about the man who escaped from us in the village? He's over there with the duke right now.' He ceased speaking when he noticed the generals walking towards Harold, who was standing on higher ground observing the scene.

'What do you think, Harold? I really feel we have a fight on our hands here.' Gyrth spoke with a concerned tone as he gazed across the marsh below, surveying the opposing forces with interest.

'Hell's fire! Look at the horses he has? There are hundreds of them!' Harold's eyes followed Gyrth's pointing finger. The mist was now clearing a little and they could make out the cavalry horses at the rear of William's lines.

For the first time, a sense of apprehension gripped the king. It wasn't fear exactly, but something he'd never experienced before. It was something he felt, not for himself, but for the fyrd, the ordinary fighting man. They had never experienced charging horses. Harold turned to Gyrth.

'The housecarls will cope with a cavalry charge, but the fyrd? It's too late to prepare them for this experience. Those horses were bred for war; they're not ponies. We'll manage, as long as the men do as they're told. Um? We're going to need a better position Gyrth.' He turned to make his way back to the men. Gyrth followed, sharpening his axe with a small stone.

'Brithnoth, Swein, Wulfnoth, Ulf!' Harold called.

As they gathered around him, Harold used a stick to mark the ground and pointed to various positions along the ridge.

'Ulf, your men will have the shield wall here. You must have them cut stakes and thrust them into the ground before them. You're to go and speak with the men under your command and make sure they understand that horses won't overrun them if they're behind these stakes. Explain that the horses will shy away. Wulfnoth,

I want your spear men here and here,. I want your sling-men to bring piles of stones, and they're to be brought into the second rank. The housecarls will need room to move.'

'Yes, of course, Harold. I'll not let you down.' replied Wulfnoth, confidently.

'Swein, you take the right flank. It has to be very closed. He'll try to charge us and make a breakthrough. It'll be our weakest point, so keep it secure at all cost.'

'I told you we should have brought the archers Harold.' Swein's indignant tone caught the king's ear and knew he had said the wrong thing. Harold glared at his elder brother, his eyes narrowed and brow furrowed, his manner uncompromising.

'Swein, keep your remarks to yourself! You'll do as I command or leave the field.' Harold's reply was a sharp, an abrupt tone Swein wasn't accustomed to receiving from his brother.

'The housecarls will be in the second rank and will move between the shield wall taking out the riders, if they get close enough. The shield wall must be held at all costs. I hope I make myself clear. We can't be made vulnerable if we stand firm on this point. When I give the order, we'll advance around and encircle them.' Harold looked for any sign of confusion or questions from his officers and brothers.

From the rear of the meeting came a rush of voices and shouts.

'Sire! Sire!' a boy's voice called, 'The Normans are breaking out!'

'What?' Harold exclaimed. The boy came closer. Harold grasped the boy's shoulder and stared squarely into his eyes. 'What else should I know, boy?'

'I'm told to tell you the duke's forces are moving toward Caldbec Hill, my lord.' he replied, breathlessly.

'Shit!' Swein exclaimed. 'I think they're coming to bring the battle to us!'

Harold became irritated as the group began to speak all at once.

'Silence!' Harold called out, peremptorily.

'Gyrth, this is what I want you to do. Bring your forces to take Caldbec. Do it now! Defend it as long as you can until I get there. I'll take the left. Swein, you make sure the right flank is defended, and for God's sake don't allow anyone to move off the slope, no matter what. If the enemy retreats, under no circumstance allow your forces to follow them when you see them off the hill! I know how these bastards fight. They will try to draw open our defences and make us advance on them. Make sure your men are fully aware. It's imperative that you keep strict discipline at all times. There's little room to manoeuvre.'

Harold noticed Leofwine approaching and he repeated his orders, so that he understood what was happening.

'One moment! Before you move off. I've something for you all.' Harold strode toward his horse and took from the saddlebag five rolls of parchment, giving one to each of his generals.

'There's no time to speak with all of my forces. So I've written a few words of encouragement I wish you to relay to them. The words I've written are my own speech to the men under your personal command. It will rouse them and give heart

to those who are not already blooded from Stamford Bridge. It will reinforce those courageous officers that were with us at that glorious victory, and will encourage those new to battle. I'll have a bell rung at the appropriate time for you to gather the men around you. You'll then read aloud to them the words I've written. Go do your duty, and good luck.' He waved to them as the generals dispersed to muster their forces. He was pleased he had such good men under him, but there was something niggling him, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He thought of Osfrid, then said a silent prayer for him.

He strode off with, Brithnoth following closely, to gather their personal housecarls. The old warrior had said nothing during Harold's meeting. He usually never did, he trusted Harold implicitly.

'It's our only defensive spot Harold, the best there is. We can't fight from the woods, you know that.' hoping that Harold would stick to his plan.

'That's why Brithnoth, if they're mustering on Caldbec, we must get them off the hill and bloody quick. If they have Caldbec, they have us. We must move to retake that hill at once. It looks like they are moving quickly. You'd better go and get your men sorted. You know what to do.'

Half an hour later Harold's forward force of housecarls moved through the woods toward Caldbec Hill. There in the foreground were a small a force of William's mercenaries mustering on the site that Harold had chosen as his own defensive position. Brithnoth strode off to gather a select force of his own housecarls to wait and be ready to clear the site of the small, but menacing collection of Bretons, then made his way back to consult with Harold.

'We've nearly half a mile to spread the forces we have and that's going to be stretching us, but I guess we can manage to secure the position.'

'Do your best, my friend. I'll move my housecarls into position immediately once you've cleared the ground. You should have their forward forces off the hill in short order.' He smiled at the old warrior, then a confident wink. He watched as Brithnoth moved off to surprise William's men.

Through the woods Brithnoth's force of housecarls moved until they arrived at the spot where they could see about five hundred of William's mercenaries and crossbowmen aimlessly milling about. There was a sergeant briefing his troop as to what was expected of them.

Boisil and his small force of five housecarls crept on hands and knees, trying to get a closer look at their enemy.

'Alan, what's the Breton sergeant saying to his men?' he asked, glad to have Alan as an interpreter; Boisil patted Alan's arm and threw him a smile. Alan began to stand, trying for a better view.

'Keep your fucking head down!' Thridred hissed, yanking Alan down towards the ground beside him. 'Do you want us to be detected?'

'I'm trying to catch, word-for-word, what their sergeant is saying.' replied Alan, listening intently as best he could to the Breton officer not more than a few paces in front of him, and translated to Boisil in whispers.

'These instructions come from Duke William himself. If anyone disobeys them, they'll hang. Do you hear?' the Breton sergeant said, finishing his speech, and

adding a final plethora of personal threats into the soup of the day. He glared when there was a mumbling of discontent from the troops as they spoke among themselves.

'Get to your positions!' barked the sergeant.

Heribert sneezed uncontrollably, giving away their presence. At that moment, the entire Breton force became aware of being spied upon by the enemy. The Bretons formed a scraggy defence, shooting off crossbow bolts in the direction of the sneezing housecarl.

'In the name of Mary!' Heribert cried out, as he saw a crossbow bolt hit the blade of his battleaxe. 'What the hell was that?' He felt Philippe pushing him further into the ground.

'It's a crossbow. You've never seen one before?' As the deadly bolts flew in toward the cowering housecarls, they began to retreat further back into the wood and thicket.

'By the balls of hell's fire, that was something else! Alan, what the hell, and where did that shower of shit come from?' Thridred was totally confused by the onslaught.

'I told you. It's a crossbow bolt. Get one of those up your arse and you'll know about it!'

'Oh, you mean like that short arrow thing that was shot at Harold?'

Philippe and Alan crouched down, sheltering behind a large oak tree and began chattering away in French as Boisil, Heribert and Thridred lay at their heels. Alan turned to Boisil, his tone very concerned.

'Philippe has experience with the crossbow. He was given some training in Normandy. They're the deadliest of weapons and, if you take my advice, you'll do as Philippe suggests, and keep your head down.' Philippe interrupted once more, in French, and began to give Alan a quick lecture on tactics with the crossbow.

'Philippe said that we can escape or we attack them when they replace their bolts. That's when we should go forward against them. They're vulnerable then, because the Breton sergeant is stupid. He told them they should loose off their bolts in our direction all at once. I guess that he thought that there might be a chance that a hail of shafts might flush us out. You can count to fifty before they are ready to shoot off another volley.' Alan and Boisil beamed a great smile at each other.

Heribert took Philippe by the arm, pulled him toward him, hugged him, kissed him on the cheek, then winked.

'You're an angel, Philippe, a bloody angel!'

All eyes were now on Boisil, as their accepted troop leader took stock of the situation. The minutes passed while Boisil thought about their strategy. He could see the Bretons were unsure of themselves. They were obviously nervous and wondering what to do next, and they weren't moving to follow through. He listened as the sergeant was shouting orders, looking constantly to Alan for interpretation.

'They're really nervous— can't you smell the garlic emanating from their sweat? They've never been in a fight before. It's plainly obvious that the sergeant's orders are being misunderstood. Look, the Bretons are just milling

about, trying to coordinate their movements. The fools haven't a clue what they are doing," Philippe whispered gleefully to Alan. He froze as he heard a series of coded whistles emanating from the woods. 'What was that?' he queried, looking at Alan, who in reply shrugged, bemused. Philippe turned to look at Boisil, who began whistling short coded whistles back towards the woods opposite them, replying to whoever was sending them a message and Boisil was very relieved.

'It's Brithnoth. He's giving us orders. We have to outflank them. If we use Philippe's knowledge of the crossbow, we can pick our moment to move. We'll shift our arses the instant Philippe gives the order. Is that understood, Philippe? When you give the order to run, we'll all move towards that partial clearing over to your right and into the thicket beyond. There we'll join Brithnoth and our fellow housecarls on the Breton flank. They know we are coming to join them.' explained Boisil confidently, crossing himself, then patted Philippe's shoulder, with a glance showing an eminent respect for his friend. Philippe nodded.

'I will do my best for you, Boisil. Be ready to move your ugly Saxon backside when the Bretons loose off their next bolts. I will call Go!' The group nodded, picked their termination point and tensed, ready to move upon his signal.

'We'll all stand up together. As the Bretons raise their crossbows and are ready to loose off their bolts, we drop to the ground. We'll need to coordinate our movements perfectly. I don't want anyone getting killed. We can't afford any losses. As the bolts pass over us, we will be safe to run to that clearing in the distance.' Philippe was enjoying the power of a short command.

Boisil took another look towards the Bretons, then glanced back at Philippe and noticed that his comrade deep in thought, concentrating hard, judging the moment to move. He will make a fine officer. He is a leader of men, a thinking man. I am so glad to have him with us, he thought, smiling.

'Look!' Philippe said, 'The Bretons are moving slowly toward us. Are you ready?' And saw everyone nod. 'Stand up after my count of three.' There was a short pause. "One, Two, Three!" All five men stood up, exposing themselves to the Bretons and their deadly crossbows.

'Loose!' Came the cry from the Breton sergeant. To a man, they raised and pointed their crossbows, and in unison shot off their bolts at the five men now standing clearly before them. As the brothers-in-arms dropped to the ground, the deadly shafts flew harmlessly over their heads and farther into the woods. The thudding could be clearly heard as the bolts ended their flight, anchoring themselves into the trees beyond.

'Go!' Philippe called, as he dragged Heribert from the ground.

They'd rapidly skirted a dense section of vegetation and were nearing the clearing, running like rabbits, when the ground beneath them gave way. In a moment, the five housecarls tumbled into a hidden chasm, which opened up below them and they slid into a heap at the bottom, dazed.

'Is anyone badly hurt?' Boisil called, who was somewhat alarmed at their predicament, and astonished that he'd not a mark or cut upon him. He gazed about in the semi-dark oubliette, its dank odour offending his olfactory sense and bringing the rest of his senses to a heightened state of awareness. He could

hear the sound of rushing water that flowed from some unseen source. He looked to see Alan picking himself up from the ground, brushing off the leaves and soil that had filled his hair and clothing. Alan moved to inspect Heribert, who lay awkwardly with his head streaming blood.

'Heribert has a nasty wound on his forehead, but he'll live.' Alan was bruised. But feeling relieved that no one had broken any bones or died.

Philippe shook off his own share of dirt from his tunic, slapping the loosest bits from his leggings as he crossed over to kneel at Heribert's head. From his hip bag, he took out catgut thread and a fine bone needle.

'You stay still, do you hear? This might sting a bit.' he said, trying to put his broken English to good use as he held the stunned Heribert's head, carefully resting it between his legs. He cleaned the wound, using Heribert's own saliva as it dribbled from the side of his mouth, and began to place the first of four stitches, slowly closing the wound. Heribert gazed up and smiled his thanks.

'You're is going to have a sore head for awhile, that's for sure.' Philippe remarked, as he gave Heribert a thorough check for any signs of broken bones. He gazed up at the light high above them. The slit was about a man's out-stretched arms wide and ten paces that in length. The sides of the chasm were sheer limestone with flint nodules embedded in the face, leached away by many years of erosion, and with no visible means to grasp or footholds to help climb. Philippe ducked as a bit of falling detritus landed about them. He cursed under his breath.

'We're totally fucked, and we've no chance of climbing out of this place. What a mess! If we stood on each-other's shoulders, we would still not reach the top.' he continued, staring at the shaft of light above him. Boisil scratched amongst the fallen debris, looking to see where the noise of the running water emanated, when he noticed nodules in the limestone, and he levered a flint stone from the wall. He struck the flint against his axe repeatedly until the sparks ignited a piece of chard linen cloth, taken from his miniature carry-sack attached to his belt. The cloth began to smoulder as Boisil collected the mass of twigs and small dead branches amongst debris that lay around them. He began blowing gently until his flame became a small fire.

'I'm not certain how long that fire will keep us warm, Boisil, but you're a genius all the same. Then of course, we need to find a way out of this predicament.' Philippe gazed about their goal looking for anything that might help them escape their incarceration. There was nothing and he sighed.

Alan too scanned their cave-like environment, but could not see any escape from within the gloom of their enforced imprisonment. He felt nervous, and paced up and down amongst the debris, cursing in French. At on end of the cave the ground sloped and he lost his footing and slid down to a slit in the base of the cavern wall which revealed the subterranean stream.

'My God,' he muttered, 'I've found it! It is a continuous flow of water that must lead somewhere. But where? he wondered. He looked up again upon hearing the sounds of men fighting and shouts of commands being given.

'It's the Bretons, shit! We can't even call for help.' He shook his head disgustedly and speculated as once more he looked into the gloom to the sound of

running water.

Thirty feet above their heads, the Bretons moved in, to follow the remaining retreating Saxon housecarls, and fell into the Saxon trap laid for them. From the side, and sweeping in around to the Breton rear, the Saxon ambush took on the mercenaries in a fierce hand-to-hand battle. Men cut men with the ferocity of devils. The Saxons used their battle-axes to slice off heads and limbs that saw all the enemy mercenaries were dead within ten minutes.

William was unable to see what had taken place on Caldbec Hill. He searched the woods beyond where his Breton forces were being massacred, evaluating his position as he paced up and down, pondering his next assault on Harold's forces. He was wondering if there would be news from the forward detachment he'd sent to take control of the hill. I needed the advantage of the higher ground. I should have settled on that bloody hill when we arrived, he thought. The duke looked skyward to see the sun getting higher and the air feeling warmer. He pivoted about to enter the tent, calling his page to attend him.

William prepared his equipment and with a page's help, donned his mail hauberk.

'Bugger and shit! It's on back to front! This boy is useless! Here, Walter. Give me a hand to put this back on properly, will you?' He glared menacingly at the boy, his raised fist ready to give the youth a blow. Fearing a punch from his master, the boy ran from the tent and disappeared into the crowd of warriors milling outside.

'It's a good sign, William, a reversal of roles from duke to king.' Giffard said, smiling.

'Shut up, Giffard. I've now to re-evaluate the situation, as it's changing rapidly. I should have moved out two days ago, but it's too late now. We'll have to settle for a pitched battle with Harold where we stand. He's good, very good, but hopefully, not too good. These men had better be up to this fight, or we are doomed.' William took a sip of wine from a wooden goblet, glancing at the map his cartographers had made of the area some days before.

'What's this word, Walter?' he asked, pointing at the map.

'That's Caldbec Hill. It's the spot where the Bretons are now.' Giffard replied, looking over the entire map's layout. 'This is swamp here, William. We need to avoid it if we can.' He pointed towards the spot then pointed to the swamp that he could see from the tent.

'We needed Caldbec Hill this morning. We couldn't have made camp there. There's not enough room at the top of the hill and the trees beyond, but it would have made a fine attacking and defensive position. Damn Godwinson! He should have been here a week ago.' cursed the duke through his teeth as he turned to kick a small wine barrel. He wheeled about and glanced up to see Giffard standing by the entrance to the tent, staring out, and listening to the noises drifting from across the low, marshy valley below them.

'It's too late for anything more than wishful thinking, William. We've more on our hands than that. Look over towards Caldbec. There are shields, and what's more, they're not ours.' William went outside and climbed onto a trestle,

attempting to get a better view.

'I wouldn't trust these Bretons as far as I can throw my horse, Walter. Look there. The Bretons have just given themselves up to the bloody Saxons! William gazed fixedly at the ground. 'The plan has changed, Walter. Here is what we do.'

He picked up a stick and outlined his intentions in the dirt, so Giffard could visualize and comprehend his revised plan. The two men stood discussing the plan for a short while, when a messenger brought confirmed news of the failed attempt by the Breton force to hold Caldbec Hill. The duke nodded and the messenger left to see to other duties.

'I rather expected this, Walter. You see I need to know what I have before me, where Godwinson's forces can be at any one time, and in what strength. The crossbow contingent of Bretons were expendable because they were just as dangerous to us too.'

'Dangerous? I don't understand, William. In what way do you mean?'

'Well,' continued William, 'They were billeted in the rear of us to practice their fucking art, as they called it. They were loosing off shots all over the bloody place! They're dangerous things to have, even in trained hands. They just shoot off on their own, you know, without anyone touching them, and they worried me. Do you know, Walter, they killed fourteen of my men last week with those damned things? They're supposed to kill the enemy, not our own people!' Giffard smiled.

'The positive side is that the Saxon fyrd have little or no knowledge of the crossbow, William. I guess, as with all new weapons, they'll find their way into the enemy's hands one day, and we will have battles, crossbow against crossbow. The battleaxe and spear will become obsolete.'

'Walter, you talk a load of shit. Do you know that? It takes half a day to prepare and load those things. Buying crossbows is a great waste of money. I could have hired three hundred extra Evreux archers with the gold I wasted on those idiots! So don't go telling me they're the best thing since horseshoes!' William said brusquely.

'I was just musing. One never knows what will be invented next. Crossbows are the future, you know. One day they're going to be improved upon to the point where you'll be able to shoot off many bolts in just a few moments.'

'Walter Giffard. What did I say about you talking shit? Crossbows should be for girls. Men fight men, hand-to-hand. Go and get yourself armed and ready for the fight. We have a day here that will be remembered forever. Mark my words. We will most assuredly defeat Godwinson and his loathsome Saxon turds. We will go down in history when we win this battle. This is a kingdom waiting to be won.' Giffard gazed at the ground for a moment.

'William, might I ask a favour of you?'

'Go ahead, Walter. What is it you wish of me?' he asked, pulling his boots.

'I'd like to be in the thick of the fight with you. As you know, I'm the standard bearer, as is my right. I would, with your permission, designate that responsibility to a young man I'm proud to have in my company. I wish to name Toustain-of-Bec for that honour.'

'Ah, yes- young Toustain. I know his family. They're good and loyal people. I

take it you've spoken to Ralph on that matter?'

'He's agreed it would be good for him; he's an honourable young fellow.'

'Then he has my blessing. Bring him here now. I will honour him with a knighthood. His father was a brave warrior. A good and honourable man, Walter.'

'He'll make a proud and worthy knight, William.'

'You'd better hurry, Walter, we'll be moving shortly to kick Godwinson's backside. Well, off you go.' the duke said ushering Giffard out of the tent.

Giffard left the tent, mounted his horse and rode off to find Toustain, a young man of twenty-one years, tall, ginger haired and handsome. He found him already mounted some way back in the company of a groom. Toustain was wearing his father's colours of red, green and brown stripes upon his tabard.

'Ah, Toustain, I've been searching for you. Come with me, my boy. Duke William wishes to speak personally with you. He's a very special role for you today, one that will make your family proud.'

'What is it the duke wishes of me, sir?'

'You'll see soon enough, my boy; follow me. Time is short and the battle is about to commence.' Toustain kneed his mount and rode after Giffard to William's tent with the sound of armour and horse leather clattering above the huffing breath of his steed.

As they neared the duke, Giffard noticed William had left his tent and was giving encouragement and precise orders to his cavalry. He and Toustain dismounted to listen intently to their master's words.

'We will be victorious, or we will die. There is no escape, except to drown in the sea at Hastings. Success depends on each and every one of you following my lead and my orders to the fullest. Our Lady Mary will be with us. For those of you that fall this day, Jesus will hold you to his breast and He will see you are in paradise with the glory of the angels to comfort you. Fight hard, and be of good heart. We have the banner of the Holy Father as our standard. The usurper, Harold, is beholden to the devil. His foul deeds will see him damned to eternal hell, and his Saxon demons will fall with him. There will be land enough for all, and riches beyond your wildest dreams.' The duke concluded his speech, then noticed Giffard approaching with Toustain by his side.

He turned to look at the bright young virgin warrior who stood tall and fit. Wearing his fine armour, the duke saw that the youth looked every bit a fighter, as was the boy's father before him.

'Ah, Toustain, I've known your family for many years. My boy, you're of good Norman stock, and your father was a goodly man. You're wondering, no doubt, why I've asked you be brought to me.' William looked first at Giffard and then Ralph. 'Walter Giffard and Ralph-of-Tosny asked that you be given the honour of standard-bearer. I've given it much thought and agree that you and your family's worthiness justify such a distinction. Give me your sword.' The duke took the sword that Toustain unsheathed and proffered it to him. He ceremonially touched the young man on each shoulder.

'Arise, Sir Toustain. Be courageous in the just fight we are about to wage.' There was a cheer from the knights whom William had been addressing. As the young man rose to his feet, Giffard gave Toustain William's standard, which he

accepted with humility.

'Keep this high at all times. It must never fall to the ground or vanish out of sight.' Giffard instructed the young knight.

Toustain held the bellowing linen high, looked about at the men before him and called to all. 'Keep faith with God and our king!' Tears streamed down the youth's face as the honour of his charge overwhelmed him. He started, when he heard the bellowing voice of his master call to his men-at-arms.

'Now, to battle!' He re-mounted his horse and looked at the sky, noticing the sun was becoming stronger. He asked the time, and was told it was the ninth hour.

The light breeze became fresher, making those men donning armour feel more comfortable. Everywhere could be heard the snorting and neighing of horses. Giffard's heightened sense of smell took in the odour of men and animals, and he found it depressing. He could never get used to the putrid faecal mess armies lived with and left behind them. While most hardened warriors were used to such filth and stench, it made him retch.

On the opposite high ground, Harold marshalled his men along the now-cleared slope of Caldbec Hill. The ranks were now three men deep for nearly half a mile, and the shield wall solid. Harold made sure that each man knew what he had to do and was determined to obliterate the enemy or die in the attempt. Harold strode with a light step over towards Brithnoth. He was in a good mood, confident and ebullient, ready to do battle.

'Brithnoth, tell the commanders to have their men lie down and rest. I don't want tired men standing around all day long for nothing, wasting their strength. At the command, they will rise and be ready to fight. I'll need the bodies of the fallen Bretons thrown down the slope. It will give the Normans something to think about when their main body starts advancing towards us.'

'That's understood.' Brithnoth turned to walk away then stopped for a moment. He turned again and looked once more at Harold.

'Good luck, my boy.'" He noticed the smile on Harold's face. They both turned and strode to their designated positions on the hill.

Harold's standards, '*The Dragon of Wessex*,' and personal ensign '*The Fighting Man*,' were placed at the highest point on the eastern edge of Caldbec Hill. Harold walked amongst his men, making sure his housecarls wore full coats of mail armour. He looked about at the gleaming shields and the mail reaching to their knees. He saw that their helmets were gleaming in the morning sun. He felt proud and smiled as he waved at them. Then asked Wulfnoth to ring the bell that brought the housecarls and fyrd to gather around him. He began to speak to them passionately, from his heart.

'My dear friends. We have come here for one reason. That is to do battle with the aggressor, William, Duke of Normandy. He makes claims to our throne and our country. He wishes to enslave us all, to see me dead and be crowned king. To do this he has to win the day, and we're not going to allow it.' He paused as a cheer filled the air. "We are going to defeat him and his effete force of whoring bastards, these men who have won only minor victories against smaller,

weaker forces. We, on the other-hand, have might, and more importantly, right on our side; we are invincible! We have demonstrated this to good effect with the defeat of Harald Sigurdsson at Stamford Bridge. We are feared for our skill and ferocity with battle-axes. Our task now is to send the evil bastard, William, and his minions to the sea from whence they came, as we did with others who came to steal our land.' A cheer rose once more from the men before him. Harold waved them to silence.

'If it's Gods will we are marked to die, we are here now so to do, to our country's loss. The fewer men that are left here, the greater their share of honour. But for our friends lost, our Lady Mary will take them into her bosom. I pray that not one man shall go to our Lord's house before his time. These villains you see before us are covetous for our land and gold. If they wish to die for it, that is their decision. Surely, we will help them to meet their maker for their efforts. Your honour, this day, will be to do your duty for England. If it is a sin to covet such honour, then I, amongst you, am the most aberrant soul alive.' There came another great cheering from the multitude. Harold looked about at the faces of those surrounding him. He could almost taste their eagerness to be at the enemy. His arms rose to quiet the crowd.

'I needn't remind you what our families would suffer should these devils be unleashed upon them.' There came a general mumbling from the crowd and nodding of heads. Here and there came a cry of '*Harold and England.*' and the men began to chant their mantra. He smiled, almost embarrassed. Wulfnoth stepped forward, waving his arms to calm the noise of the mean fighting men below him.

'My brothers, our king has more for you. Pray let him finish. Put your joy aside for a moment until you have heard all he has to say.' Soon, silence reigned once more. Harold cleared his throat then took in a deep breath. He felt almost exalted. To his men he was a warrior God, yet he knew that mere words would not win the battle to come. Nonetheless, he had to give the fighting men what they required. With his arms raised, he fed them the food of glory.

'Is there a man here who has not yearning for this fight? If so he should depart now. I wish not to die in that man's company. I doubt there is one of you here who will leave this place without your king. I would not lose so great an honour as his fellowship. The many who outlive this day will come safe home to see old age. My brothers, yearly, on this date we will gather here and hold a great feast with his comrades. Each man shall show his scars and say: 'Look at what we old men have suffered for your freedom. You shall remember us and recall our stories of the feats we did that day. Our names will live on your lips forever. All shall be remembered in glory until the world should end.' Harold bent forward, the love for his countrymen clearly sincere and natural. 'We comrades and happy souls. There is not one of you so vile as to betray his brother. I love each of you as I love my Lord Jesus in Heaven. Those able men that not here with us shall hold themselves accursed. Their names cheapened, a vile replica of manhood. The Blessed Mary is with us. Let us now do our duty.'

The housecarls cheered enthusiastically to Harold's speech. The fyrd, heartened by the confidence of the housecarls, whom they looked up to and admired, cheered. They were ready to do battle for their king, a god in all but

name, or die in the attempt. The housecarls began sitting as ordered, one by one, each psyching their immediate comrade into a frenzy of blood-lust. As one by one the housecarls then rose, chanting and calling to William's forces.

'Bastard sons of whores! Go back to your mothers and ask who were your fathers!'

Though frightened, the fyrd felt a sense of honour to be in their company. None but the few who had fought and survived the battle at Riccall and Stamford Bridge had seen such a show of horrific incitement.

William heard the noise emanating from the enemy and glanced across the valley. He grabbed the pommel, and with one swift manoeuvre mounted the steed. It was a fine animal, a present from King Alfonso of Spain, a trusted ally. He cantered towards the already mounted knights of his main cavalry who sat patiently, awaiting orders from their chief. There was a nervous murmuring among the younger knights. Those already used to battle made them feel better with tales of old encounters and the reassurance that, if they did exactly as was required, they would not only survive, but be rewarded handsomely for their brave and heroic efforts.

The iron duke, accompanied by his half brother, Odo, carrying his special mace with spikes on a ball held to a wooden staff via a short chain. Walter Giffard rode alongside Odo, with sword and a lance. Behind him, rode Robert-of-Mortain and Toustain-of-Bec. Halting a few paces in front of them, William addressed the men.

'Be of good heart,' he called. 'I am looking for a courageous volunteer to earn his spurs and a place in history. I require one of you brave and honourable men to challenge a Saxon to single combat. He shall defeat the Saxon pig, which will show them your courage, and of the men who fight with you. Who amongst you will come forward to show of what he is made?'

'I don't believe I'm hearing this. He's looking for a lunatic to undertake a suicide mission!' One infantryman said out of the side of his mouth to his neighbour.

'I bet you my last coin there's always one fool stupid enough to volunteer.' came the reply from a voice nearby.

Then, from the assembled, voice a called out. 'I'll go!' An arm rose above the men, waving wildly.

'I thought as much. It's that fool, Taillefer.' the first man said. 'He's a bloody juggler, an absolute arsehole. He was pissed as a fart last night, and he can't hold his drink, let alone a spear.' the man said, snickering as he fought his way through to the front, trying to hear what was to be said to the idiot, Taillefer.

Taillefer danced and sprang towards the duke like a bungling gorilla. He jumped forward as if his pants were on fire. It was clearly obvious he was still intoxicated.

'My 'hic' lord, give me a horse and I will 'hic' kill your Saxon dog for you.' exhorted Taillefer, slurring his words, unable to coordinate brain and lips.

William looked bemused at the sight of the oafish creature before him, who

looked as if he could barely understand, let alone ride a horse and fight. He gazed about at the laughing crowd and saw no others willing to take on the task. After a few moments' thought, he turned to Odo.

'Give this man a small horse and equip him with a spear.'

'I'll do that with great pleasure, William. I'm always willing to see a brave man die.' Odo laughed so much he nearly fell off his mount. He returned a few moments later to present Taillefer with the horse and spear.

'Die well and we'll see you in paradise when our time comes to sit with our Lady, and Jesus will open his loving arms to us.'

'Death before 'hic' dishonour, good priest. I'll not let 'hic' you down.' he said, slurring in a voice devoid of comprehension of the horror about to befall him. Turning towards the Saxon shield wall, Taillefer rode with his spear aloft, shouting and whooping loudly.

'Will no 'hic' Saxon of noble blood come 'hic' to fight me?' Jeering at the crowd of disbelieving Saxons, he waited for some sign of movement from the ranks.

The shield wall opened, and a man of small stature strode from within the wall carrying a spear. The man strode toward Taillefer, when he lifted his spear in readiness to throw the weapon, when Taillefer drunkenly threw his own shaft at the man, killing him stone dead. With another jeering cry, Taillefer rode into the shield wall, but his mount shied away at the sight of spears protruding from the Saxon shields. Taillefer was thrown off his steed into the waiting Saxon housecarls, only to be hacked into a million pieces. Taillefer's head was tossed back down the slope to the waiting crowd of Normans below.

Odo approached Toustain and grasped his arm in a vice-like grip. 'You've seen a brave man die, my boy. Keep faith in our mother, Mary, and you will see a glorious day. Go forth boldly. Stay close to William, and never lose sight of him. Where he goes, you go. Is that clear?' Toustain nodded, and with a whoop, he rode to his master's side.

'Not yet, Toustain. We must see the metal of our enemy first.' William said. Toustain was straining in his eagerness, when William held onto the boy's armour, and repeated his words to him. Together they watched as a force of Evreux archers advanced toward the dip in the vale beneath them. When they arrived, they stood, awaiting the order to shoot.

Trumpets sounded from both sides, so loud they were almost deafening. The calls from the Saxon shield wall were louder than ever as the nerves of all those on the battlefield stretched to fever pitch. Stones from the Saxon slingmen flew toward the Norman bowmen, many hitting the unprotected archers below. The bowmen fell back, while others lost their footing in the wet marsh.

'Loose!' came the order from the bowman's sergeant-at-arms. Arrows flew at the Saxon shield wall. The archers looked on, noticing their arrow's efficacy had come to naught. They were hitting an effective and impenetrable wall. Again and again the archers shot off arrows, with each round being just as completely ineffective as the last.

'The next time I listen to you, Giffard, I'll remember your fucking stupid advice to bring expensive and useless crossbowmen and archers!' William growled.

The infantry was now moving uphill to attack the shield wall, and as they came within range of the Saxons, shafts from the spear throwers killed them instantly. As the infantry retreated down the hill, Leofwine ordered the fyrdsmen to retrieve their weapons.

This is too easy, thought Leofwine, as he took off the head of yet another infantryman. 'The bastard has to have something better than this, surely.' He called to Leofric. 'Leofric, I need some of your fyrdsmen to help clear these bodies away. It's like a bloody town slaughterhouse here!' He saw Leofric nod, and moments later noticed him marshalling some of his men to the task. The lull in the fighting was not long, but long enough to have the corpses thrown from the shield wall.

'Out! Out! Out!' the Saxon housecarls shouted as they threw the bodies of their victims down below at their comrades. Blood ran down the slope as if a dam had broken on a river. The Saxon housecarls slashed, cut, and scythed each invading infantryman down.

'Dieu aide!' came the call from a retreating Norman infantryman. William glared at the infantrymen and yelled at them to regroup. He was angry at the ignominious defeat of his forces. 'Fucking cowards!' he bellowed. He turned to Giffard.

'Giffard, we'll go in now, and with full strength. Muster the cavalry ready to charge.' He galloped off to gather the mounted knights around him. 'You know what Duke William expects of you.' Giffard recalled a visit from Odo, asking him to join with him to see William dead and his brother king. He pondered the situation, wondering if Odo could be trusted to keep his word. The thought certainly was tempting. At least, he thought, he would no longer have to suffer the wrath of an annoyed duke, a prospect that pleased him. But if Odo's plan went awry, what then? The consequences would be worse than what had happened to Sargent Snap. No, he couldn't bear the prospect of such a punishment.

The duke scanned his protective shielding before nodding approval. He wheeled his mount about to lead the way, his knights moving in closely to follow with their canter becoming a gallop. Up the slope of Caldbec they raced to the summit. They threw their javelins into the Saxon forces. The Saxon housecarls replied by cutting down their horses. Slicing the legs of the knight's mounts, men fell or were pulled off their horses and hacked to pieces. Blood, guts, and brains were splattered over the combatants, and each man was inflamed with anger and raging blood-lust.

William made headway towards Harold, using his mace to instantly kill any Saxon he was able to hit. A frenzied housecarl lunged at the duke's horse, his axe scything through the animal's legs and cutting the beast down from beneath the duke. His lance simultaneously penetrated the housecarls chest before William fell to the ground. He regained his composure, and in moments the duke was on his feet again.

Seeing another housecarl about to slice him in two, he dodged the swing and grabbed hold of the man. They fought hand-to-hand for what seemed an eternity, when at last, he overcame the housecarl, severing his head with a swing from the housecarls own axe, leaving the head hanging to his body only by skin and sinew.

A loose horse was attempting to rise from a fall in the blood-sodden mud beneath him. Grabbing and mounting the horse, he went to turn the steed when he took a blow from a large stone to his face, and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

'Mother, is that you?' William said, placing his head on her breast.

'It is, William. You need to sleep now. Your father will be home soon, and he'll wish to see you bright and early in the morning. He wants to take you hunting with him.'

'I've never been hunting, Mother. I can't wait to see what happens when I shoot a deer for you. I want to kill a boar too.'

'You're all excited, William. Go to sleep. Wake in the morning, refreshed and keen for the kill. I want to see fresh meat on the table.'

'Goodnight, Mother.'

'Goodnight, my son.' She kissed him sweetly on the forehead.

Eustace dismounted, picked William up, and carried him on his shoulders back towards the marsh below, twice tripping and dropping him as a rider-less horse galloped past in a fright, almost trampling them both to death.

As William regained consciousness, he spoke nervously.

'Uh- oh, it's you. It was all a dream.' He looked about him. 'What's happening, Eustace?'

'You fell, Sire. We're not beaten. We have made progress; of that I'm sure.' William felt the throbbing under his eye and the trickle of blood down the side of his face and from his nose. He winced as Eustace washed the blood off using water from a goatskin carrier. Eustace helped him to his feet just as a spear landed in the spot where William had lain moments before.

'I need a horse, Eustace.' William then he caught sight of a knight retreating from the battle. As the knight approached, he yanked the rider to the ground, and mounted the steed in his place.

'A helmet, Eustace, give me a bloody helmet!' Eustace removed the helmet from the now dismounted and shaken knight and passed it to William.

William rode back towards his scattered cavalry, held the helmet aloft, and called to his knights. He galloped to the front of his men. Turning to face them, he called to them.

'Look here! I am alive! Follow me! Follow me!'

Harold looked on, unimpressed with the Normans.

'We are doing well, Harold,' Gyrth called, 'we have them on the run.'

'It's not over until we have defeated them, little brother. Keep your flanks guarded tightly. They'll attack again very shortly.' he cautioned, then noticed Leofric's flank disobeying his specific orders to keep close, and not move forward. 'Shit!' his ejaculation was lost to the noise of battle heard. 'Stop them, Leofric! Stop them at all costs!'

He had spotted the Bretons being mauled by the right flank. The Bretons were running back down the slope, followed closely by fyrdsmen, all thinking they had routed the Breton force, and thus, it was reasoned, the Normans, too, were now defeated. The fyrdsmen raced down after them and slaughtered each and every one

in a frenzied binge of killing and mayhem, yelling and whooping.

'What the hell is going on?' Brithnoth called to Swein. He'd spotted the Norman cavalry swinging around to take advantage of the gap that Leofric's men left in the shield wall. '

'I'm very concerned at the prospect of cavalry infiltrating the right flank, Swein! In the name of Mary! If they get in, we're doomed! Swein, help Leofric close that gap at once, and for God's sake, hurry!' He yelled, with a tone of desperation in his voice. He watched in horror and disbelief as the Norman cavalry encircled Leofric's detached forces. 'Oh hell! The cavalry are slaughtering our flank! Swein! Get that hole secured at all costs; advance together!' But it was too late. A group of Norman cavalry rode behind the now ruptured shield wall and making advances.

Giffard galloped into the fray with a group of knights, killing fyrdsman after fyrdsman.

'Get to Harold! Cut out his gizzards!' Giffard bellowed, as he lunged hungrily forward, cutting down yet another fyrdsman as he advanced slowly toward Harold's standard. Round the back he rode, cutting and scything as he rode, like a machine let loose, all before him fell, making headway toward the king.

Gyrth caught sight of Giffard and Robert Beaumont heading toward Leofwine's position flanking and protecting Harold's standard.

'Leofwine!' he called, in a panic, 'they're in behind you! For God's sake, move!'

Leofwine turned at a thunderous noise behind him, only to see a horse with its rider bearing down on him. The spear penetrated his chest, his eyes rolled, and a gurgling rush of blood came from his throat. There was no pain, just the sounds around him. He heard the voices of men calling for their mothers and the noise and thuds of battle-axes slicing bodies in two. He could make out the horse above him, the rider's feet in stirrups and the painless crushing as the animal stepped upon his abdomen. The flow of adrenaline and endorphins outnumbered any sensation of pain. He felt the smooth withdrawal of the rider's lance from his chest and warm blood gushed to fill his clothing under his armour. His blood dribbled from his mouth as his lungs tried to heave in a vain attempt to get life-giving air, but they ceased to draw in breath. Leofwine closed his eyes as the sensations of consciousness left him. The darkness of death fell upon him to send him into paradise.

Gyrth looked on in horror as his brother's body shook in the throes of death. Seeing men die was nothing to him, but this brother was one person whom he loved even above Harold. He stood, momentarily staring at his brother's lifeless body, when he felt the warmth of blood trickling down his chest. He fell to his knees, as his hands felt for the protruding spear that had entered his back and was now in his hands.

'Leofwine, you have a comrade on your journey.' Gyrth fell to his side just as a Norman horse placed its hind hoof on his head, crushing the orb as it would an apple. Together they rose above the scene of battle, hand in hand, looking down on the ensuing carnage below them.

Fighting furiously, their brothers and comrades were oblivious to their

heavenly journey into the arms of the Lord. Harold's housecarls, seeing what had occurred closed ranks. In a frenzied and horrific show of force and strength, the housecarls went on scything and cutting into all before them.

William saw that his losses were too great. He needed another stratagem, and called on the herald to sound the horn to signal the retreat, to pull back and regroup.

In the lull that followed, Harold turned to look at Brithnoth, who was now on his knees. He noticed that his general was holding his chest. He called for help as he rushed over to him. His lips were purple, and his face turned from pink to blue.

'Brithy, where are you injured?' He looked for any sign of blood or wound. His voice was clear and sweet toward his friend. Harold laid the old warrior on his back.

'My chest is tight, Harold, and the pain severe. I can't breathe too well.'

'My friend, we must take you to safety.'

'No, Harold, this is the end for me. I watched my mother die this way.'

Brithnoth raised a hand to the sky. He saw his parents waiting for him, beckoning him to come to them.

Harold lifted him up and held his friend in his arms, as Brithnoth drifted away to be in the hands of God. He laid him down on the ground in a gentle way such as one would put a child to bed, and shed a tear which fell upon Brithnoth's face. He stroked his white hair and kissed his forehead.

'I love you Brithy.'

Looking towards the enemy camp, the overriding anger within him was forcibly suppressed. A sense of duty to his people and to his men gave him the will and the power to carry on the fight. He called to six of his housecarls to carry Brithnoth from the field.

'Take this brave and glorious warrior into the woods, where he can be buried with dignity, once the battle is won.' He looked on as the housecarls stepped reverently forward. 'We take this warrior to a place of peace, a place, where the bravest of warriors can rest amongst the spirits of his ancestors. Be gentle, my comrades, this man has God within him. Respect his body as you would his spirit.' Harold said softly.

Guthfrid came forward to take charge of carrying Brithnoth's body. His eyes were full of sadness as he took his comrade, a warrior who'd died with honour. In total silence, the housecarls picked up the venerated warrior, and singing verses from the sagas, carried the dead man into the woods, where they laid him temporarily to rest with dignity to await burial.

Harold stared at the carnage about him, then turned his gaze to see the retreating Normans readying to regroup in the valley below. He heard the sounds of horses thundering hoofs and the shouts of men calling, moaning, crying and cursing, filling the air. He felt distant, the episode surreal. He came back to himself- aware of a presence. He looked around to see a Fredric standing beside him.

'What is it, boy? Spit it out!'

'My lord, I'm to tell you that Earl Leofwine and Earl Gyrth have perished.'

Fredric stared at the ground almost shamefully. His body shuddering with shock at the horror he saw around him. He felt his king's hand upon his shoulder, and a finger lift his chin. Harold gazed into Fredric's eyes.

'Go and see to your duties, boy.' He let go of the youth, and watched as Fredric made his way back through the crowd of housecarls, stepping over corpses and over dead and dying horses. He looked on through the steamy haze of spilled, warm blood and human tissue, to the enemy forces beyond, trying to make out from amongst the cavalry any sign of Duke William. He felt the anger welling within him getting stronger. For this misdeed, William was going to pay dearly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Alan went down on his knees and peered through the hole in the debris.

'Boisil, come here. I have found the water—it's a huge flowing stream. It must come out somewhere, and the cavern must be vast to flow this fast.' Through the gloom he glanced up into Boisil's rugged face. 'What are the chances of being able to fashion a torch so that we might be able to see a little more clearly?'

'Now, let me see.' Boisil rubbed his chin. 'Every chance in the world, my old chum, but it'll cost you a kiss for finding that hole down there' he playfully pursed his lips, then grinned at Alan's ugly muttered reply. He began to fashion a torch from a fallen branch and various twigs and sticks.

Alan took the lighted torch from Boisil. It was made from his spare clothing, and soaked in tallow that he'd seen Boisil take from Thridred's knapsack. Its light was weak, but far better than nothing at all. He peered over at Thridred.

'How are you feeling?' Thridred waved his hand wearily, but said nothing.

'He'll live. We've come through much worse injuries than this scratch, Alan.' Boisil looked toward the daylight above them, his hands gripping tightly with frustration. 'The battle is well begun, and we are missing it. Bugger! Can you hear the noise up there? The sooner we get out of here, the more chance we have of fighting those bloody Normans.'

'It's decision time.' Alan looked over at Philippe and spoke in French. 'We have to agree that there is only one possible way out of here. We have to follow the running water.'

Philippe sat with his hands on his knees, considering their options. He raised his head to look over at Alan.

'That is the way out, but the water will be very cold. We've no idea how far we will have to go before we find where it leads. The outlet might be a long way off.' Philippe grinned as realization struck. 'The marsh!' he continued, 'It must feed the marsh in the valley below!' Philippe stood up, brushed himself down, and patted Alan on the back.

'It'll not be easy, but it's worth a try. Give me that torch. I want to take a look down there.'

He passed Philippe the flaming stick, telling them what they were to do.

'Philippe will lead the way, he's used to caverns. As a boy, he used to explore the caves around our village. He has no fear, only a healthy respect. If there is a way out, he'll certainly find it. He told me that it must flow out as

a spring somewhere. The current is too strong to do anything else. It is a large outlet, because if it were not it would flow much slower.'

Slipping ahead of the others, with torch in hand, Philippe made his way through the hole and into the cavern below. He motioned the others to follow him as he led the way along the quick-flowing water. The water was ice cold and came up to their knees. The cold numbed his feet and he lost some feeling in his legs, but no one complained or was willing to admit any discomfort.

'Hold onto each others belt. We might have to go under the water to get by any rocks protruding from the roof, and we won't-' Philippe's words trailed on, as he slipped and fell, losing the torch in the icy blackness. 'Chat!' he exclaimed, his words in French, becoming a torrent of self-abuse for his own stupidity, he mumbled allowed. 'I must do this! We must go on, as we did as children. I must put my fear aside. Remember what it was like. Oh, the excitement, and the elation when we found a way out! We were stupid children, and in those days, we feared nothing. The times our father beat us for coming home covered in filth.' He smiled, glad that he was not alone, that the others had faith in him. He felt along the side of the cavern, and with one hand on his head protecting it from protruding rocks, he moved onward.

'Keep your head down low, Thridred.' Heribert said, feeling for and finding his brother's bandaged head. He handed Thridred an extra thick wad of cloth to tie around his stitched and throbbing forehead. 'We'll find a way out of this. After all, as Philippe said, the water has to come out somewhere. If we follow the flow, we'll either get out or drown; simple.' He smiled wryly, but in the blackness no one could yet see it anyway. 'I'm not about to let that happen. We didn't come all this way to die in some icy water. At least I can't smell the scent of that musty bloody cavern in here. That odour made me wretch!'

The darkness' totality of was crushing as they made their weary way onward for what seemed an eternity. With the channel deepening here and there, the roof at one point was a mere head-span above the waterline. Still they struggled onward.

Four hundred paces away, and some five leagues above them, was the hated Norman enemy. The Normans rested for a while, trying to regain some of their depleted energy. There was talk amongst the men, of victory within their grasp, and the tension within the Norman camp was now high and electrified.

'What now, William?' Odo was trying to hide his '*I told you so*' smirk.

'Don't aggravate me, Odo. You knew this would be no pushover. We've come too far to withdraw now. I want the Evreux archers to reform and shoot high in the air. We then charge in on a broader front with brute force. I'm sure we can break through. I just pray we have the light to do it. There is not much time left before the darkness descends. Harold will then have the advantage. We can't suffer the risk of a night attack from him. Our attack has to be now!' William dismounted and stood with his fist smashing repeatedly into his hand, his anger welling at the incompetence of the infantry he had hired.

'We've lost a good third of our force, William. If we fail in this charge we might lose everything.' Odo looked back, becoming increasingly nervous. He had

hoped to see the pageboy he had sent to gain a ship at hand. Yet he was nowhere to be seen.

'The alternative?' His eyes narrowed, as if he knew what was coming next from the lips of his traitorous half brother.

'We negotiate terms, of course.' If I had the opportunity, I would see you dead, brother, he thought. Odo glanced around, looking for one of his crossbowmen, but there were none to be seen.

William's face contorted in anger. He snatched Odo by his tunic, pulling him violently toward him, grimacing menacingly, his face flushed purple with rage.

'If you think I came here to talk peace terms with that usurping thief, then you're very much mistaken, Odo! If we'd not the same mother I'd kill you for your cowardice and insolence. Do I make myself clear?' he hissed through his clenched teeth, his spittle splattering Odo's face.

Odo was choking, his face began to turn blue, the enforced lack of air bringing him to the point of unconsciousness. He felt William push him back onto his wooden saddle. He sat, stunned, dazed and shocked, hardly able to keep himself seated.

'Now, go and see to it that the archers are ready immediately. We go in as soon as six shots are loosed; is that clear?'

'Yes, William.' He cursed his compliance under his breath. 'You, fucking bastard, William, I've more loathing for you, than the devil.' William swung around.

'Did you say something?' He glance at his brother, his eyes narrowed once more as he saw Odo shake his head. 'Send Eustace to me at once. I need him for this task. I never did trust that man much. It's about time he showed me where his loyalties lie.'

'Yes, William, I'll go fetch him right away.' he swung his steed about and rode off, muttering more curses oaths under his breath.

'And cut out the 'Yes, William, or I'll cut your balls off!' William said, grinning. 'If you had any. I don't think I trust you either Odo.' he muttered to himself as he watch Odo ride off. He looked on as the archers were positioned forward and lined up, awaiting the order to shoot high into the air.

Eustace rode into view looking for the gonfanon that William carried on his lance, complemented by the ribbons on the back of all his helmets so that his forces could recognize him from the rear. He approached the duke and veered around to be by his side.

'Sire, Odo told me that you needed me for a task.

'Ah, Eustace, I thought for a moment that you'd been lost in the last charge.'

'It takes more than a Saxon barrage to kill me, Sire. In any event, like you, I'm invincible.'

'I guess we are. For now. I want you to go with Giffard, and six of your best men, to take out Harold's standard. I will follow closely. I want Godwinson for myself. I'm coming from the left side to support you. You'll be the distraction I need to get in close. If that can't be done, then take him as best you can. Word has it that he has reinforcements on the way, so we must have this over

with and done before dark, and before they get here. We need to be able to defend ourselves when they arrive.'

He gazed about the battlefield, where he saw nothing but bloody carnage, amongst the green of the wet marshy meadow below.

'I understand, Sire. I'll see to it that I have the best available men with me. Rest assured. I'll do my duty unto you, or I will die in the attempt. I've a vested interest, too. You promised me great wealth, and I will not go back home a poor man.'

'Cut out the shit, Eustace, just go do my bidding.' William waved the man away, shaking his head slowly at Eustace's overt sycophancy.

Eustace rode off to collect the men he knew would not let him down. He rounded up Robert Fitzerneis, Walter Giffard, Hugh-de-Montford, and Hugh-of-Ponthieu.

Trumpets sounded once more, and the archers shot off their shafts. The arrows were high in the air and fell almost vertically upon the housecarls, killing many and maiming many more. Eustace rode with Giffard and those chosen knights into the fray. The duke galloped directly towards the centre of the now broken shield wall, while Harold's housecarls advanced laboriously towards William and his mounted knights, once more cutting and scything down all before them.

Thurkill turned to Harold, and asked if he might help Leofric on the flank, but Harold shook his head and refused.

In the lull of fighting, King Harold gazed about him. 'Leofric is dead in the water, Thurkill. He's no fight left in him. He can't help himself, nor can we help him. We must make our stand here and hope our reinforcements arrive before nightfall. He'll have to make do as best he can.' As Harold spoke, he noticed two Norman knights slicing their way through fyrdsmen off the west slope. The knights were moving closer towards him, killing as many on their way as they could. With their swords and maces swinging in unison, the king saw they were making steady progress upon his position.

Godfric called the remaining housecarls around him.

'We must protect the king and the standard at all cost. To surrender will mean disgrace!'

Harold was preoccupied with mustering his other remaining housecarls around the Golden Man standard to make a last ditch stand and, if possible, to kill William. If I can do this, the field is ours, he thought, as he slashed at yet another cavalryman. He turned to look for his next victim, when he noticed Aelfwig, the eldest of the surviving housecarls, holding onto the standard, waving it to call those who were still able, to come to their aid.

'Honour, Aelfwig, honour!' bellowed Harold.

Once more, William rode into the heat of the battle. This time for his life and his honour.

'Advance! We're through. Advance! England will soon be ours. There's land for all. Land for all!' William cried excitedly.

Cedric felt a hand on the back of his neck. A housecarl, with orders to remove him to safety, lifted him bodily and took him to the woods. Cedric glanced back, as the fighting became more furious than ever. Cedric climbed a

tree and began whooping and calling as the housecarls began killing all before them, yet paying a terrible toll, themselves.

Eustace and Giffard fought on furiously, managing to break through into the Saxon core, until they came across the housecarls Aelfwig and Godfric.

'You bastards- come and meet your maker!' Godfric bellowed. The two men stood back to back, slicing and killing everyone who came within striking range.

'Die, you Saxon bastards, die!' Giffard screamed, as he threw his lance at Godfric. The lance pierced Godfric throat, killing him instantly. Aelfwig turned around and swung his axe at Giffard, missing him by the width of a fingernail. Hugh-de-Montford turned, and catching Aelfwig momentarily off guard, took off Aelfwig's head with an arc of his sword. It rolled to the ground, and as it did so, he pushed his sword into the mouth of the severed head and, picking it up, placed it upon his pommel. Aelfwig's eyes seemed to roll. His mouth tried to speak, before his brain finally lost consciousness and he was no more.

For a moment, Hugh was unnerved and he threw the head to the ground. He regained his composure and quickly rejoined the fray, while Giffard wheeled his horse around to retrieve his lance, riding on in search of the '*Golden Man*' and Harold Godwinson.

William spotted Swein and headed towards him at a gallop, dodging blows and thrusts. Swein saw the rider approaching at a furious rate, and turned to meet him.

'You killed my brother, you-.' Before he could finish the sentence, William's lance pierced his foe's neck. Swein dropped to his knees, blood spurting from his severed jugular vein high into the air. He looked with startled eyes at William and then dropped to the ground as the duke's horse placed a hoof on his chest. Swein felt the duke pull the lance out of his neck. Swein's head rose for a moment as the spear was withdrawn, then fell to the ground as the lance slid from his flesh. Swein was freed from mortal pain and suffering as the blackness of death overtook his senses.

'Godwinson! There will be no more Godwinsons on this island after this day is done. I shall see that all who bear that name will die this day!' William lifted himself up in the stirrups and urinated on Swein's remains.

Cedric looked on from the tree helplessly.

'Father, beware. They're coming. Oh please, God, no!' Cedric cried, his words, only to be lost to the din of battle.

Hugh-of-Ponthieu broke free of an attacking fyrdsman and made his way with great difficulty toward the *Golden Man* standard. His breathing hard, the sweat pouring from his near-exhausted body. Eustace and Giffard, in support, were hacking away at housecarls who were all around them fending and fighting as they rode on.

Giffard was oblivious to the carnage around him or to the danger to his person, as he sought out Harold. He noticed, a few paces in front, Hugh advancing with a spear in one hand, sword in the other, hacking, slicing and piercing. As if divinely untouched Hugh rode onward towards his quarry.

Harold was fighting off three dismounted knights, who had managed to cut their way through his bodyguards and were now within reach of him. He swivelled

about to see Hugh bearing down behind him.

'Usurper, go to the fires of hell! Take my lance, Harold Godwinson!' cried Hugh with an intense scream. Harold moved quickly, yanking Hugh off his horse, only to feel Giffard's lance pierce his chest.

'Die, you bastard, die!' Giffard bellowed jubilantly, as he saw Harold fall to the ground.

Harold's heart thumped hard, the heart of a king. He felt the agonizing pain as the splinters from Giffard's lance spread through him. The sharp sound pierced his ears, the cracking and breaking of his own ribs. A warm wetness flowed over him. The life blood drained from his adored body revealing the vulnerability of their leader, reducing him to the status of the common man, the same as those he had fought alongside. He watched as the red, sticky fluid spurted from the splintered lance's entrance into his chest, soaking his face and that of the horse above him. Harold looked into the face of Walter Giffard. Were they really that different? Yes, he thought, one giving life for his country, the other serving one who took life for his own gain, one dying in honour, another, living in disgrace. Harold turned to shun the face of the selfish taker of life and land, to fall amongst those housecarls, who were his comrades. In life, and now in death. Then, there was no pain. Just a feeling of numbness, combined with a feeling of final relief as the blackness overcame him, and as the din of battle faded. In a state of painless euphoria, he saw Edith and his children. Harold held each of his children in his arms as they were born. He kissed them and blessed each one. Next, he kissed his beloved Edith. Exhausted, Edith smiled, and kissed him back.

'Harold, wake up.' said Edith Swanneck, 'It's time to play with Gunnhild. You promised to take her fishing.' Harold held her close, kissing Edith on her sweet, full lips, as he bid her to make love.

Harold's blissful Euphoria faded, and a bright light beckoned to him. In the distance he could see his father and his brothers surrounded by a familiar brightness awaiting him.

'Come, Harold,' they beckoned, 'come with us. We are happy here.' they called in unison.

The king, the brothers and the son walked towards them, lost, and found in the brilliance of the light.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Giffard, enraged, cut off the dead Harold's head. He dismounted, picked up the decapitation and placed it in his saddlebag. His lungs were heaving as he remounted and rode around, whooping. He noticed Hugh bending over Harold's remains, his knife in his hands disembowelling the dead king and took the private parts as a trophy.

His emotions were still at fever pitch. Giffard had seen many of his comrades die, as well as personal friends perish at Saxon hands. He sat in his saddle, looking at the carnage. The sweat seemed to flood his clothing and his heart beat so fast he felt it would burst.

Hugh straightened, then fell to his knees exhausted, gulping for air.

'My God, -we've done it, Walter. We're victorious! Can you believe it?' He began laughing uncontrollably. He tried to say more, but his euphoria barely matched by his tiredness.

William rode over to survey the bloodbath where the mutilated corpse of Harold lay in a vile filth of entrails. He dismounted, took both Harold's standards, walked back to his horse and slid them under his saddle harness. Turning, he strode over to Harold's body. Steam was rising everywhere, from the warm bodies of the dead and dying. The carrion paid no attention to the walking humans. The birds fought amongst themselves for entrails, despite an abundance of fresh, warm carcasses.

'Who has done this vile deed?' he asked in a raging tone. 'This man was a king, a brave and courageous warrior. He may have been a usurper, but he fought like a warrior to the very end.' He glared at Giffard. 'Who was it that did this to this man?'

Giffard looked sheepishly at William, his head bowed and began stuttering,

'I, I was enraged, William. I cud, cud, couldn't st, st, stop myself.'

'My king, it was I who disembowelled Harold.' replied Hugh, who was now on his knees in front of him, readying himself for execution by his master's hand. He gazed at his new king's feet, daring not to look up or rise.

'Yes, by the saints, I am king. I am your king!' he exclaimed as he gazed out across the field. A feeling of great emotion overwhelmed him. His acute heightened senses were much as a hawk, stalking his prey. Yet, the feeling of disappointment created by anticlimax was in his heart. He could not quite understand what it was. It was all over, the ballet ended. The adrenaline in his veins still overpowering him. He began to shake uncontrollably, almost as if in fear. He took in a deep breath, looked once more at the dismembered corpse, king to king and crossed himself.

'Get this wretched body cleaned up, and make him ready for burial.'

'William!' Eustace called breathlessly, as he ran towards his master, pointing vaguely in another direction. 'Reinforcements have come, just over there behind the wood. They've taken up a position at a place they call Oakwood Gill. As far as I can tell, it's a strong position for them. I've no idea how many there are, but there are enough to give us battle, I'm sure. The fleeing fyrd have joined with them too, Sire.'

'Eustace, take Robert-of-Bec and a good force of men, and flush them out! We can't afford to keep fighting forever. Be quick and decisive, the light is failing fast.'

Eustace rapidly retraced his steps, gathering around him fifty cavalymen who could still ride to reinforce the infantryman. They reached Oakwood Gill some few minutes later and attacked at once, riding forward in the dimming light. Through the brambles rode the cavalry, when a great screaming and cry rang out, from those who had ridden and fallen into a ravine just in front of the Saxon line.

Robert dismounted to take a look at the men and horses below him.

'The carnage is horrendous, Eustace. All I can hear are whinnying horses and the cries of trapped young knights calling for our help. Shit! What should we do

now?' The naivety of a young knight who had just that day experienced his first full-scale battle had not a clue what he should do. He shrugged at Eustace.

'Robert, tell the rest of the cavalry to dismount.' At that moment, a stone was thrown, hitting Eustace fully in the face. He placed his hand over the wound, and Robert helped him away from the danger of more missiles. The blood streaming down Eustace's face disguised the lesser wound, made it look worse than it actually was. Eustace winced as Robert poured water from his carrier over the cut.

'Tell the officers to pursue the Saxons on foot.' He was spitting blood from the side of his mouth as he attempted to give commands, but his swollen and numbed face was making it difficult. 'I'm placing you in direct command. Meanwhile, I'll make my way back and get this wound dressed.'

'Yes sir. Thank you, sir.' The boy stood to attention. 'Shall I go now, sir?'

'That would be a good idea. Go on, and look lively, lad!' Eustace watched as the young man took off in the direction of the pursued forces. Eustace was not sticking his neck out a second time. He was going to let the young and foolish have their turn in the noose for a change. He'd had enough for one day.

Robert approached the noise where the fighting was deadly and in earnest. Hand-to-hand, the bloodied Norman knights fought, killed and finally drove off the defenders. He looked on into the gloom to watch the remnants of the Saxon force fled into the failing light. Their Saxon king was dead, and their heart was no longer in the fight.

William called his knights together and they gathered around him, exhausted.

'I want my quarters set up here, on the battlefield. Odo, and I want you to see this is done at once.' He turned to Giffard and placed a hand upon his shoulder. 'Walter, I want you to go and set guards on full alert. This might not be the end, and we should expect a nocturnal attack. I want you to rotate the guards every two hours. I know you're tired, but it has to be addressed. Hugh, go with Giffard. You will need to post guards too. Oh yes, send someone to bring the cooks and food here. In the mean-time the other officers can rest and eat.'

'Leave it to me, William. I'll see to what needs to be done.' Giffard left to call pages to do their new king's bidding. He massaged his back along the way, it was aching all over. He hobbled off to set the guards at their posts, then slowly made his way back amongst the bodies to where William's men had hastily set up a tent.

The king turned to Eustace, looking at him curiously. 'How's your bloodied face? Turn around for me. The candlelight is too dim to see properly from here. Oh, that's a nasty cut you have. I have one on the back of my head, and another here, over my eye.' he said, pointing to the various wounds.

'My injury is a little sore, Sire, but other than that, I'm fine.'

'Good. In that case, I've a job for you. Your task is to gather and list our our dead, then to bury them. See that it is done immediately. You only need to bury our dead. The Saxons can rot where they lay.'

Eustace made a move to exit the tent, when he halted by William's comment.

'You can't dig graves in the dark, you idiot! He bellowed, then noticed

Giffard and Hugh enter the tent. 'Has anyone news of De-Montford?' he asked of the newly arrived men.

'He's having a nasty laceration dressed William. It's quite a nasty wound which needed attention from the physician. I've just walked past him. Shall I call him for you?' replied Giffard.

'No. Let him be healed first. That reminds me. I've a huge bump on the side of my head. Take a look; would you, Hugh?' Hugh leaned forward to see a huge plum-shaped lump on William's head just above his right ear, along with some congealed blood, the remnant of the stone that had taken him to the ground at the start of the battle.

'It's just a graze, my king. It probably feels larger than it actually is. Though it could do with cleaning up. I'll go see to it that the boys bring you some warm water. Jesus, I ache all over!' Hugh exclaimed, as he tried to straighten up. He placed his hand to his hips and with a grimace, straightened upright.

'I'll have to get used to the word king. It sounds rather odd. For the moment, you need to go to your duties Hugh. We will discuss what needs to be done in the morning light.' He was craning his neck. 'Err, is that singing I can hear?'

A short way off from William's tent, a group of men began singing. Their music creating a crescendo of harmonious voices. Knights and infantrymen grouped together with other non-combatants, while a priest conducted a service of remembrance and deliverance. It pleased him to hear them, and for the first time he could remember, he shed a real tear.

The morning light brought the seagulls crying overhead, occasionally fighting with carrion as they pecked at the eyes and entrails of dead warriors. The stench of flesh hung everywhere, and flies filled the air in black masses of motion.

William's men walked amongst those left dying or dead, taking from the dead chain mail, swords and gold rings from ears, leaving those still alive to die in their own filth. The wounded Normans lay where they had fallen, desperately waiting for help of some kind.

Giffard gazed out across the battlefield and recognized the scene for what it was, butchery, as the participants had never before seen it.

William awoke, feeling his head still thumping from his wound. He called for his pageboys to come see to his needs. He looked out from his tent, surveying the carnage.

'Boys! Fetch hot water and clean clothes. Hurry, or feel the power of my fist!' The boys ran out as fast as they could to do his bidding, some to boys ran off to boil water and make food for their new king.

He sat gazing at the ground, when he heard the murmuring of woman's voices and men talking. The women spoke in a Saxon tongue, which got the better of him. He listened to the women pleading, requesting to take their dead husbands, fathers, and brothers for burial. He cared not. Neither he nor the guard outside could understand the pleading of the Saxon women. Hidden from view, he merely

looked on through the slit in the tent flap, chuckling at the woman's animation, as they knelt, motioning the digging, depicting their wants.

He noticed from amongst the crowd two women who had pushed forward, speaking to the sergeant in cultured Breton voices. The two women translated the other woman's needs, requesting permission to see to their men. He noticed the tall, slim, well-dressed woman was of obvious good breeding, that the elderly woman was also high ranking.

He threw open the tent flaps to see his guards looking bemused at the sight of so many women, when suddenly he noticed Giffard approaching the women.

William held his finger to his lips, indicating that Giffard should not speak, and for him to move around to stand behind him.

'I'll take charge of this sergeant.' The soldier stood to one side as William looked about the throng of distraught females. He approached the two well-dressed woman of rank, cautiously.

'You're the woman speaking Breton.' He looked her over, then glanced at the old woman beside her, who was similarly well dressed. There was something very special about these two women, but he was going to find out just how they fitted into the scene and why they had come.

Edith spun round and bowed her head toward him submissively.

'My lord, I am Edith Swanneck. I have come to find my man. We have come to claim Harold. I was his woman for many years.' She nodded toward Gytha, 'This lady is Harold's mother, Gytha. Will you give us pardon and leave to bury Harold? Will you allow these women to bury their men as well?' Her head lifted to gaze into his eyes. So this is the man who takes our land and will subdue our people, she thought, suppressing her outward anger.

William looked away, his hand pointing in a vague manner toward the multitude of women.

'You women may bury your dead. Go find them, and then clear the field quickly.' He returned his gaze to the two refined women.

'So, you're Edith, the Swanneck. You're indeed a pretty woman.' He watched as the women dispersed to gather their slain men folk. Their weeping and wailing could be heard across the battlefield and it irritated him to distraction. He turned his attention again to Edith, this time more closely.

'You ask that I allow the removal of the body of the usurper, Godwinson! Give me good reason and I might consider your request.' With hands on hips, William stared deeply into Edith's face.

'My Lord, I would hope that you could understand that the dead should, no matter their crime, be treated with deference.' Edith dropped to her knees. 'As you are now my king, I prostrate myself before you, to beg your leave to bury Harold with the due honour that I held his person. The Lord, Our God, has taken his soul into heaven to await His judgement. Jesus forgives all sins after death and confession. Only God can judge those who have died in battle. He leaves the judgement of the living to the living. Therefore, let my plea be heard, lest our Lord in Heaven judge you. Gytha cannot communicate her words to you, Sire; she speaks not your tongue. Gytha offers Harold's weight in gold, should you so wish it in exchange for her son's body.'

William stared at the old woman sternly.

'Go and see the body. It is with Bishop Odo, over yonder.' He pointed toward to the bishop. 'In the meantime, I'll consider your offer. You'll be called upon soon with my decision.'

'I thank you, my lord, for your kindness. We will trouble you only once more for your conclusion.' Edith bowed, took Gytha's arm, turned about and left William's quarters.

Giffard stepped forward, his anger boiling over.

'The effrontery of that woman, William. Offering gold in exchange for her son! If you accept, it won't look good. Those men out there fought and died for you!'

'They were paid, Walter, and paid well, too.'

'Yes, they were paid, but look at the price they had to pay! If the men got wind that you accepted a bribe for such as Harold, they might turn on you. You can only take loyalty so far, even you understand this much.'

For the first time in his life William felt embarrassed. He wasn't angry with Giffard, just disappointed with himself that it had been necessary for this truth to be pointed out to him. He now had to juggle his innate greed with his undeveloped sense of right and wrong.

'What would you have me do, Walter?'

In disbelief, he couldn't understand why William hadn't struck him for his insolence. Seizing the opportunity, he followed him giving him advice, careful of his friend's nature to hit out at the first hint of dissent or disrespect.

'Well, I would see to it that Harold's corpse be taken to the beach, and placed under a large stone with these written words, 'By the Duke's Command, Harold, You Rest Here to Guard the Sea and Shore.' That would satisfy the men, William, and it would have a sense of irony too. What is a chest of gold compared with the fortune you have at your fingertips? Treat the body with reverence, by all means, but keep in mind the reality of our position. As the thought has just struck me. de-Malet is good at stone-carving. I'll have a word with him, if you wish.'

'You usually talk a load of shit, Walter, but in this case, I agree. I like the idea of a stone on the shore. It's a fitting tribute.' He showed him a broad smile. 'Come, we must eat and talk of what we have to do next. I have one or two scores to settle before we move on to London. I want you to pay a visit to Romesy. Those bastards, if you recall, ambushed and killed some of your men back in September. We need to repay the favour. Then we must go to Dover to secure the port, the defences, and any resistance there might be. After this, we must go to Winchester, then London and, in that order. Is life not good when you're on top of things? Go and fetch de-Malet. We are to become masons, Walter.'

'The water is making more of a hissing noise, Thridred. What's more, I can feel that we're near the end of our journey.' Alan said through chattering teeth. 'The water's risen close to the roof, but there is just enough room in the dome of to squeeze in five heads.'

'I'm freezing to death here, Alan.' Thridred replied, feeling decidedly ill.

'If we don't find a way out soon, we'll die of cold.' It was all he could do to get the words out. He heard Philippe give an exclamation, but did not quite catch the word.

Philippe ducked into the water, only to resurface moments later.

'Lumière du soleil, Lumière!' He was jubilant. He felt for Heribert's axe, taking his weapon, and disappearing once more underwater. He came up for air, and submersed yet again, this time to be joined by Alan. There was light, not a great deal, but light, all the same. Both men resurfaced, momentarily, sporting grins as wide as a bull's flank. 'Succès, voilà, bon!' His joyful ejaculation only matching that of the rapidly receding water level.

As water began to recede Philippe began to sing. Alan joined in, to the bemusement of the other three as they felt, as well as watched the water going down. The Domfront brothers had been able to smash through a small crevice, enlarging it to a hole big enough to allow not only the passage of the water, but themselves, as well. Philippe led the way through the exit, then assisted a shaky Thridred, followed by Heribert, Alan, and Boisil.

'I wonder where the hell are we?' Philippe murmured to himself, as he stood looking about the small open cave into which they'd passed. He watched the water flowing out the mouth of the cave. He walked over to view the surroundings. He continued to shiver violently as the breeze to bit at his wet clothes. 'We need to get a fire started, then dry our clothes. We'll soon perish if we mess about in this wind.' He turned to the others and showed them a broad grin.

Moments later, the breeze dropped until all was still. The noise of battle had gone. Only the rustling of the brown leaves falling off the trees could be heard. They scrambled cautiously out of the cave, picking their way down the slight slope. The sun gave the cast of morning, even the weak light made them grimace, as their pained eyes were unaccustomed to anything other than the pitch-blackness of the cavern.

Heribert took a flint and bunched some crisp, dry leaves and kindling together and began to make a small fire. The day was warming as the five naked men sat around a few gathered burning branches, their clothes drying in the heat from the fire. The steam rose vertically and soon they were warm.

Boisil volunteered to stand guard as the others slept. He was wondering of the outcome of the battle. He listened hard, but heard nothing other than the birds in the trees, until he, too, fell asleep.

Edith and Gytha approached Bishop Odo. Choosing her words carefully, she spoke in a soft tone.

'My lord bishop, I am Edith Swanneck, and this lady is Harold's mother, Gytha. We have leave from the new king to find and identify Harold's body and, perhaps, to bury him. Might we look to see if we can distinguish him?' Odo gazed at the women, astonished that William had not had the women slain on the spot.

'Madam, you may see for yourself. Here is the purple robe of deference to Harold as the late king of England. You must be warned. This is not a sight for a lady, and certainly not for a mother to see her son slain so. In the heat of

battle men do things to other men they would never do in any other course. I will leave you now so that you may mourn for your late king. I am going to William to see what is to be done.'

Odo, making the sign of the holy cross on his breast, walked slowly away, not wishing to be near, once the women had seen Harold's remains. He, too, was disgusted at the sight of Harold's butchery. He crossed himself, and prayed that he would be forgiven for his part in Harold's death and for those around him, that had been slain.

Edith held Gytha in her arms and, with Odo's words still ringing in her ears, begged Gytha to look away. She knelt, and gently took the purple shroud in her hands. She knew it was Harold, yet praying it was not, slowly drew back the cloth that covered the body of her beloved man.

'Oh, Mother Mary! What have they done to him?' She reeled backward.

'Gytha, you mustn't look; please, I beg you, do not turn. Harold's wounds are not those that you should see.'

'I have seen disembowelment before, Edith. I have been expectant of that. Harold is my son. I brought him into the world; I should at least have the right to see him leave it. I know what is to come.' Gytha turned and looked at Harold's decapitated remains. She felt her heart pounding as the sight of her son's wretched and dismembered corpse tore into her very being. She let the tears of sorrow flow at last. Her hand reached out to touch the lifeless remains of what was once a great and honourable man, a son she had born with pride into this world.

'It might not be Harold's body.' Gytha said, but she knew it was. She turned away, sobbing, her grief now overwhelming her. Edith looked down at him. She bent, turning the naked, bloodied, headless corpse over, to reveal a small but distinguishing tattoo on his buttock which she, herself had made upon it in their youth. She kissed the mark that she had made so many years before. Then both women got to their feet. Edith held Gytha closely.

'We must see that we are allowed to take him, my dear.' They turned to walk away, silently comforting each other. Not a word spoken between them as they made their way off the field of slaughter.

At the edge of the battlefield Edith heard a voice calling to her. It was a voice they both knew well.

'Lady Edith, please come to help me. It is I, Cedric.'

Edith left Gytha's side and hurried over to Cedric, who lay helplessly underneath the bodies of two housecarls who'd died defending him.

'Oh, my God! Cedric, are you badly hurt?' she cried.

'I'm sure that I have some bruises, my lady, but other than that, I'm okay.'

She struggled to pull away the corpse of one housecarl, trying desperately to release the youth from his entrapment. As she knelt to take the young man in her arms, Cedric shivered. She kissed his forehead. Her joy, intermingled with her sorrow tore at her soul. She was trying to stem the flow of tears. Seeing Cedric's face brought Harold back to life. She tried to suppress the confusion of such mixed emotions, the vivid flashes of her man in Cedric's face. She stared at Cedric's tear-streaked features and pulled him closer to her bosom.

'Did you know we have lost the battle, and that your father was killed?' She asked, her lip quivering. She wanted to be strong for him, yet there was no need.

'You knew that he was my father then. He told me so, himself.' he said, as he gazed up at her.

'Yes, of course. I've always known.' She held him tightly to her, stroking his hair.

'I saw my father fight until he was killed by the Normans. He fought to the very end, the way he told me a warrior should die.

'I was told this was so, Cedric.'

Cedric became tearful again, his emotions overwhelming him. He'd experienced battle from a short distance at Stamford Bridge. But this was his defeat, his ignominy. He pulled away from Edith's comforting arms. He stood with his shoulders firm, his back straight and tall, turning to gaze at the battlefield. As he surveyed the atrocious scene, he felt sickened by the sight and the smell of those fine men who'd died with their king. He composed himself. No more would he shed tears. He had become a man.

'My father took care of me, educated me, and took time to talk with me. He was a good man and a fine king. I shall do all in my power to avenge his death. No Norman shall live on English soil as long as there is breath in my body, Lady Edith. This I promise. I will find a way to redress the wrong done to my father, and to all those Englishmen who lie here, butchered in this field. For their mothers, wives, and sisters, I give this oath.'

'Come with me Cedric. We must go to Winchester and then on to Ireland. We have plans to make. You shall have your opportunity to avenge your father and your countrymen. I speak for the queen on this, I promise. The Normans have not heard the last of this Saxon nation.'

They walked to where two horses were tied to a tree. Cedric helped Gytha to mount her horse, then assisted Edith to mounted the other. They moved off slowly into the woods along a path that followed a stream of bubbling water. It was clear, almost pure, welling from a distant spring.

Edith thought of the queen and of what the hermit had told them upon their visit. She thought too of the wizard who had visited Harold before the death of Edward. Could this wizard have prevented all of this carnage? A wizard from the future! Harold called him an angel dressed in strange clothes. He tried to touch him, he'd said, but he couldn't. What magic could have prevented this? Why did he refuse his help? Perhaps Wizards are from the devil, she mused. These beasts, whose greed brought disaster, have left honourable men to rot on the battlefield. Never in the history of human conflict was so much owed to such men who faced, fought, and died with so much dignity. You will be avenged, my love- you will be avenged.

Cedric led them into a small clearing and, there before them, was the sight of five naked men. 'Housecarls!' he cried, 'Lady Edith, they're housecarls!'

Boisil got up and stood tall in his nakedness.

'My Lady Swanneck, is that you?'

'Boisil! Why, what are you doing here, and naked?'

Yes, well. We were with the king, but we fell into a crevasse, and we know nothing of the outcome. We only shortly released ourselves from our watery imprisonment. How is the king? he queried, picking up his dried clothes, he began to dress. You might be wondering why we are all naked, my lady. It's a long tale. Nonetheless, you might tell us what has occurred with the king?

We thought you were all dead on the battlefield!

The other men startled awake and began to dress. Confused, they gathered around her wanting to know how their righteous king made a glorious victory.

He gasped. Her words struck him like an arrow.

Dead, my lady? what do you mean dead? My God! you are going to tell me that the *bastard* defeated us! He stared at the ground in utter disbelief.

Edith nodded.

'Yes, we are defeated. Everyone is dead.

Boisil gazed at Cedric and he saw him nod.

Our king is dead. We've let our king die, and we were not by his side!' The disbelief on his face was obvious. Boisil turned to the men who were now standing around the fire. All is lost to the Normans. Harold has been defeated. We have work to do! He then turned to Cedric.

'Cedric, my boy. I am heartened to see that you're safe. I need to know what happened. Sit here and tell us.

Edith and Gytha gazed searchingly at the two men that looked like Normans. The woman's eyes were disdainful.

'Are these two men your prisoners? Gytha asked.

'Indeed they're not prisoners my lady. This man is Philippe, and here is his brother, Alan. They're Frenchmen. They fought daringly with us. If it were not for these two brave men, we would be drowned. They're good men, but more of their story later. He turned his gaze to Cedric. 'Cedric, we must know what happened.

They all sat around the fire as Cedric relayed his story. Cedric told of the heroism of the English housecarls, and of the Normans near defeat. He described the last moments of Harold, and of his heroic last stand in the face of certain death.

In turn, each of the men told his story of the events of the last few days. Alan and Philippe sobbed. They understood that the good people of England were now to suffer ill fortune under the yoke of a hated foreign tyrant.

Thridred got to his feet and stood looking at the young. He reached out to touch the shoulder of a youth thrown savagely into the world of men by the events he'd just witnessed.

'You shall have your revenge Cedric. He looked about at his companions.

'These men will teach you their art and skills. We will do all we can to rid our land of the Normans. They will rue the day they came to England. He then turned to Gytha and knelt before her.

'My lady, you are the widow of a great and valiant man, the mother of a king and a queen. You have seen your sons die in battle. Now your daughter is a dowager queen. We, here, pledge our allegiance to you and Queen Edith.

Gytha looked almost shocked as they all knelt before her. Their deference

towards the mother of such fine sons was all too obvious. She looked with pride upon the men kneeling before her. She raised her hand a little at them.

'My late husband, Earl Godwin, would have been proud to have had you serve with him. I am but a woman, and you, my dear, faithful men fill my sad heart with gladness and pride. Come with us to Ireland. We shall regroup and prepare for the conflict ahead.

Gytha turned her gaze to the two Frenchmen. She clasped their hands in hers.

'Philippe and Alan Domfront. We are proud and honoured to have you with us.

They gathered what little they had and prepared to follow the ladies into the thick, dark green of the English forest.

THE END

EPILOGUE

The priest stood over the old man mumbling the words of the Last Rites in Latin and listening for Philippe's confession. He turned his gaze to Poppa and slowly shook his head.

Philippe opened his eyes to gaze at the brave robin standing at the window and smiled at the red-breasted creature. The bird chirped and fluttered its feathers impatiently.

'It's time, my beloved.' Thora said sweetly. 'I've waited a long time for you.'

The light grew brighter and Philippe felt a deep warm peace stealing over him. Thora became a shadow in the centre of the light, moving slowly towards him, her hands held out from her waist. Her smile was pure and loving and her demeanour longing. He stretched out his arms to her to feel her warmth and love.

Thora took his hands in hers and kissed his lips so softly. She smiled.

'My darling. Come with me there is no pain in heaven, only love.'

They walked hand in hand into a welcoming light where a group of people awaited smiling lovingly, their arms outstretched. His father; mother; his brothers, Alan and Thomas; his adopted parents, Charles and Adela; and Maria were all waiting to greet him.

Philippe looked over again as the robin chirped once more.

'Come along, Philippe.'

Philippe closed his eyes for the last time.

The robin hopped out of the window, and they both flew into the heavens.

Poppa kissed her father goodbye, the tears streaming down her face, falling onto his cheek. She rose from the bed and fell into Emma's arms and they each comforted the other.

'They're all together Emma, in peace with Jesus.' She felt Emma hold her closer, and more tightly. She felt Emma's tears on her neck. 'We're the elders now Emma. We must be strong for the others.'

Poppa glanced up to Alan's shield that hung on the wall beside her father's bed, the crossbow bolt that saved the king still embedded within it.

'The children must now know our fathers story. And, one day, we shall tell

them our story, Emma.'

Poppa took Emma's hand in hers and led her outside to gather the children around them.

THE END
OR IS IT?